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THE QUESTION OF GREGORY

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The Question of Gregory

Daisy Kenyon

The Walsh Girls

ELIZABETH JANEWAY

The
Question
of Gregory

GARDEN CITY, N. Y.
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FIRST EDITION

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THE QUESTION OF GREGORY

Fortunetellers and predestinarians are suspect in our world because they assign limits to time. Space being bounded and the map filled in, there is no place for us to give to magic except the future. So when young men die, we cannot accept it as tragedy—the bell tolls for us and for our power, we shiver in the unholy wind of taboo. Superhuman and sacrifice, less than human because we fear to mourn them, the young men are shoveled under and the mound heaped with treaties and pacts and scribbled papers, and a stone monument posed on top like a paperweight to keep all down. But the wind blows and flutters the corners of the papers like the fluttering unreachable griefs and memories in the back of our minds.

The dead do not walk. Guilt walks in the name of the dead. Grief and love can lay their uneasy spirits, but who loves enough to do them this last service? Too few. Most of us would rather be frightened than mourn. Why should the end of a life be more than a fence around a garden? We must limit space to love it, but we are afraid to limit time, having taken from Peter the power to loose and to bind and given it into the keeping of the old man with the scythe.

In November 1944 a young man named Tim Gregory was killed near a town called Aachen in that much-fought-over borderland where Germany, France, and the Low Countries meet. But it took almost two months for this event to be established, and it was not until January 4, 1945, that the news of Tim's death was sent to his next of kin.

The news did not have far to go. All over the country the letters from the War Department and the starred telegrams made laborious journeys through the snow of Maine and Minnesota to distant villages, hummed on the ice-coated wires, or slumbered

for hours in a postman's leather bag. But Tim Gregory's next of kin was in Washington, close to the central organization of the war. John Gregory, Tim's father, had read a great deal about the fighting in Germany, including much that had not been in the newspapers, although the engagement in which his son had been killed had been too small to be mentioned in the digests he received. He was Undersecretary of the Department of Public Information, and he worked very hard at his job as he had worked at a succession of less important Washington jobs for ten years. He had come there in 1934, from New Haven, to work for the New Deal. Tim Gregory had been eleven years old then. Now Tim Gregory was dead—definitively and finally dead, in black and white instead of merely in flesh and blood.

The telegram from the War Department was brought into John Gregory's office by a Department of Information messenger (a plump little girl in bobby-socks) and placed on the desk of his personal secretary. The secretary, whose name was Rose Carmody, stared at the yellow envelope, wondering why the wire hadn't come in the usual way over the telephone. Then out of the tension of those days of the last German drive, out of her knowledge of the letters that hadn't come for six weeks, she divined what it must be. Startled, she looked up at the messenger girl. This cherub returned the look gravely, aware of what she had brought, but insulated by her youth and her anonymity from its effects. Of course she is only the messenger, thought Rose, and looked down again.

"Do I sign for this?" she asked.

"Yes, please. Here."

Rose wrote her usual fluent signature with a touch of amazement that it came so smoothly. The messenger withdrew her grave gaze and left. There was nothing for Rose to do but pick up the telegram, unopened, walk to the Undersecretary's door, and go in. She had worked for Gregory for eight years, in one of those long office associations which, aside from the physical (and there had never been any suggestion of that), are nearly as intimate as marriage. She had brought him some twenty thousand messages, she supposed. Now she was bringing him the one which announced the death of his son. She did it as fast as possible, carrying the telegram like a hand grenade.

John Gregory sat behind his desk, his swivel chair tilted back, reading a sheaf of typewritten data stapled together unhandily. The pages wanted to tear away from the staples, and while it would have been more convenient to give them a quick yank and free them it would also have been messy. The report had to be returned to General Donovan and therefore it was as well not to let it get messy. So John Gregory read it, and was annoyed, and missed several rather important points because of his annoyance.

But since Rose was now advancing across the room with the telegram in her hand, this did not matter very much.

"What is it, Rose?" he grunted at her.

She reached his desk. "This came," she said, not quite holding out the telegram to him.

"Why the hell don't you open it then?" he said violently, and for the eighth time caught the sheets of the report which he had turned over, and prevented them from ripping.

Rose tore the envelope open. Since he was in a temper it was the only thing to do. She knew his temper very well. It was infrequent, but when it came it towered like a pillar of fire over the petty annoyance that had set it off, until everything in the neighborhood had been consumed. She would have to deal with his grief after he had read the message. It would be insane to get in the way of his anger before he knew what was waiting for him.

He reached out and took the telegram from her, still holding the fiendishly slipping OSS report.

Rose looked over his head out the window.

General Donovan's papers hit the floor with a slap and were ripped square across by the heavy metal caster of the chair that pulled over them.

John Gregory put his head down on the desk, into his folded arms.

Rose ran around the desk and bent over him. He turned, put his arms around her waist, and held onto her rigidly, as tight as he could. His glasses had come off and were hanging from one ear. She wanted to take them off but she didn't know how to go about it. For he held her perfectly still and without moving.

She never forgot that, and afterward she decided that it was this rigidity of his, the paralysis of his grip, which had made her

feel there was something odd in the way he took the news. She could not remember seeing anyone else, in grief, who sat absolutely still. Rose herself came of a large family who combined an enormous amount of vitality with almost no foresight at all, and so got into trouble with great frequency. No one of them ever felt grief without crying, or cried without rocking back and forth. John Gregory did neither.

In fact, after a minute or two, he let her go, reached shakily for his glasses, put them on, and read the wire again.

"I'm so sorry," she said inadequately, knowing her inadequacy. "Oh, John, I'm so——"

"It's better to know," he said, and got up, pushing back his chair and thus completing the ruin of General Donovan's report. He turned to look down at it and for the first time his lips quivered and his hands jumped a little on his wrists.

"I'll fix it," said Rose, "I'll retype it, don't worry—— Are you going home?" she added, for he had opened the closet door and taken out his coat.

He stood still, facing into the closet, as if her question had stopped all movement. "Ellen," he said, and the name was heavy in the air. "No. Not yet. Not home."

"It's all right," said Rose quickly again, "I can take care of everything. The Secretary was going to call you after the conference this afternoon. I'll see if I can get the information and make you a memo. You can call me at home tonight if you want to know about it, or about any calls or anything—I'll take care of it all. Don't worry."

"Thank you, Rose," he said. "You're wonderful."

He went out the back way to the elevator. The door shut behind him quietly, sucked into its jamb by the automatic closer. She had never felt so alone in all her life.

Wonderful, she thought ironically, leaning against his desk. What did I do? Nothing—I might as well have been a post or a tree as a human being. Something to hold onto—and he didn't even do that for more than a minute. She began to tremble suddenly and sat down in his chair. I shouldn't have let him go like that. He isn't—— He ought to—— He ought to have cried. She sat there remembering her uncle Bryan, rocking and weeping, weeping and rocking, outside a closed door. Inside, the doctor

was working on one of her twin cousins who had been thrown through the windshield of her young man's car in an auto crash.

He ought to have cried like that, like Uncle Bryan. He'd have felt better. Uncle Bryan did. And Dora's face was all cut to bits.

But he's not like Uncle Bryan. He's different.

He ought to have cried just the same. It's more than flesh and blood can bear to stand such a thing alone and without crying.

And Rose pressed her hands to her cheeks and suddenly, herself, was crying—crying and rocking in the Undersecretary's chair, where he had sat so still. Bit by bit she felt better, and stopped and went out to wash her face and then back to her desk, her work, and the telephone.

John Gregory walked out of the echoing building and into the thin sunlight of January. There was almost no one in the street, for it was midafternoon and the government buildings had sucked their inhabitants back in from lunch and were not yet pouring them out at the end of the day. It was rawly cold and the streets were dirty and wet with slush. He would have liked to take a taxi, but he did not know where to tell the driver to go.

He walked therefore, across the running gutters and the rime-marked sidewalks, away from the river, north toward the hotels and the shopping center, toward the White House and the little parks where, in more clement weather, famous men liked to sit and sun their auras. He walked this way without conscious volition, because he wanted to leave behind the area dominated by the newest government buildings, which seemed to him now like huge mausoleums. All the intentions of the past twenty years were buried there—the frantic dreams of the '20s, the desperate hopes of the '30s. And so, after all, was the last of his youth, the last ten years, the time when he had made his career.

All the time that Timmy had been growing up.

It's Timmy's youth that's buried there.

I'm only forty-five.

But you're not—dead. Timmy is dead.

Men my age have died too. I could not go. I could not leave. I have served——

Through his trance a taxi rushed, just missing him and splashing his legs with slush. "Why the hell don't you look where you're

going?" shouted the driver, who had pulled up twenty feet ahead and stuck his head out the window.

Gregory's rage blew up about him like a whirlwind. Striding gigantically, on the wings of its gale, he reached the cab, opened the front door, and said, "Get out. Get out. You nearly killed me."

The driver was young, yellow-haired, driving through the cold bareheaded. He pulled on the emergency brake and started out of the cab.

Gregory hit him and knocked him back against the steering wheel.

The woman in the back of the cab screamed.

The driver put one hand on each side of the door and pulled himself out. "You dirty——" he said, his fist covering the epithet he had used. Gregory staggered back and began pulling off his heavy overcoat. The driver waited, grinning, until he was free, and hit him again. He tasted blood in his mouth and came in on the driver, into a haze of blows. A police whistle sounded shrilly, and then someone was holding his arms. He pulled helplessly at the pressure behind him and swore. There was a cracking pain in his shoulder and he went down on one knee and stopped, bent over, looking at the ground. He spat out a mouthful of blood onto the gray concrete of the sidewalk and stared at the pattern it made.

He began to hear words.

"—walking like he was drunk, he was," the driver was saying, panting, "and when I yelled at him to get out of the way he came running up and opened the door and hit me before I even——"

"Let me get up," said John Gregory.

"You stay where you are," said a heavy voice behind him.

"—knocked me back into the cab—I like to broke my back—he'd-a killed me if I hadn't hit him back. Ask the lady. Isn't that right, lady? Listen, I don't go looking for trouble, and anyway, I wouldn't hit no old guy like him unless I had to. Ask the lady."

"That's quite right, officer," said the woman. "He walked right across in front of the cab. It was just good luck we didn't hit him."

"Good driving," said the driver.

"And then he came running up like a crazy man and——"

"Let me get up," said Gregory again. There was no answer except a burst of pain in his shoulder.

"Let's see your draft card," said the heavy voice to the driver.

Grumbling, the driver pulled out a cheap wallet, found his draft card, found his license, and showed them.

"O.K.," said the voice behind Gregory. "You want to charge him with assault?"

Gregory surged upward with all his strength. It was not quite enough. "You bastard," said the man holding him, and slammed him down on the ground again. His knee hit the pavement and he thought dazedly through the pain that it would be unbearable if he should cry; the last and final indignity. His will clenched on this determination desperately, and just long enough. Then he was let go, and fell forward on his hands. The policemen moved around, took him by the front of his coat, and stood him up like a puppet. He saw that there was a small crowd gathered around. A police car drew up with its siren blowing and two more policemen got out and came through the crowd, saying, "Move along there. Move along. Move along." No one budged, and one of them turned back and started the people going.

The other stopped in front of Gregory and said, "What's all this?"

The driver and the woman and the first policeman all talked together until the policeman stopped the other two and told the story.

The second policeman looked at Gregory curiously.

"He nearly killed me," said Gregory suddenly. He had not meant to speak at all.

"You nearly killed yourself," said the policeman. "What's the matter? You crazy? Where's your draft card?"

"I'm cold," said Gregory. "Can I have my coat?" It was handed to him grudgingly and he put it on. Even with it on he still shook, trembling uncontrollably inside the warm, well-made, all-wool overcoat.

"Where's your draft card?" said the second policeman again.

There was nowhere to run, no way to get through the group around him (avid eyes, slack mouths)—for he was its center, it existed because of him. Perhaps he would never get rid of it, it would follow him everywhere, little low whispers behind him

forever. And now he must tell it his name. He wet his lips. The policeman was waiting.

"Come over here a minute," Gregory said rapidly to the officer who had come late, who had not seen—not held his arms behind him, nor jerked him about in the ultimate physical humiliation. If he could tell him alone—strike up some kind of an alliance, no matter what its terms, get someone on his side . . . "Come over here," he muttered, "and I'll show——"

"You'll show me right here," said the policeman in a voice like iron.

Gregory felt his teeth bite together, reached in his pocket, and pulled out his wallet, heavy with official identifications, with passes to the War Department, the Navy Department, to various places that were not even known publicly to exist, and handed the whole thing over. It was at once a desperate gift of his entire self and an invocation of all the powers behind him.

The policeman took it. "Jesus Christ," he said after a minute, and turned and shouted over his shoulder to the lingering remnants of the crowd, "Move along there, move along." He turned back to the wallet, found a picture of Gregory, and looked up, comparing the long lean face under the straight hair with the one in the photograph. He handed the wallet back slowly. Gregory took it and put it away, waiting, waiting. But his name had not been spoken and only the one man had seen.

The policeman's face hardened in decision. "Why did you hit that man?" he asked.

Because he nearly killed me—— Gregory almost said again. And then stopped, the words dead on his lips. For the policeman's decision was double-headed. It had resulted in a question. And if the question could be answered, then he might walk away a free man. A sentient and reasonable being awoke within him. With the speed of light, his instinct for self-preservation raced round the circle he was caught in, probing for a way out.

The policeman waited.

Gregory wet his lips. "I just got word——" he began slowly. (And horror awoke in him. No, I can't tell him, he thought, I can't. I can't use Timmy's death to save myself!) But the voice went on more swiftly, "I just got word my boy was killed. In Germany. My only son. I guess I was—I guess I didn't know

quite—what I was doing. I'm sorry," he said to the driver. He felt his jaws tighten again and for a moment nearly choked on the fluent speech, but the voice went on again, automatically, pouring out of his mouth like vomit, with the same sickly-sweet familiar taste. "Look, I'm damn sorry. I—I apologize. I just got the message, the telegram; we hadn't heard from him for six weeks, and—I just got the wire, and I walked out of my office and ——" He reached for his wallet again, more surely now, and took out a ten-dollar bill. "Would you accept this—just to take care of any damage?"

The driver stared at him, his face still grim. Then he shook his head once and said, "Keep it. It's all right. I don't want——" He broke off, turned away, and went over to his cab. The gears ground and then he called out the window, in the silence, to Gregory, still holding the money, and the puzzled first policeman who had not seen the wallet, "Next time pick a fight with somebody your own age," and drove away.

"My packages!" said the woman. "He's gone off with my packages! Stop him! Catch him!" One of the policemen ran over to the police car and started in pursuit. The last of the crowd ran off after him in excitement, and so did the woman.

Gregory and the second policeman were left standing alone on the pavement.

"How old was he?" said the policeman.

"Twenty-one," said Gregory briefly.

The policeman shook his head heavily. "I got three overseas," he said. "One's with Patton and one's——" He stopped, evidently feeling that this was not just the thing to tell Gregory, who had no one with anybody any more. "You better get home," he went on gruffly. "There's a cab."

"I can't," said Gregory in a tone of gentle lucidity. "My wife. She doesn't know yet. I have to tell my wife. About the boy," he added in explanation.

"Ain't she home?" asked the policeman, puzzled.

"Yes. I can't tell her right off. She'd know something was wrong if I got home early. I thought——"

"Something is wrong, ain't it?" said the policeman.

Gregory looked at him and then dropped his eyes and began to turn away. He had to get away. He had to get a drink, before

he began to shake, to realize what he had escaped—disgrace, ruin, the loss of everything he was. But the policeman took his arm—in a friendly manner, not in the agonizing grip of steel that his colleague had used—and stood shoulder to shoulder with him, holding him at the curb. Another taxi came by slowly, and the policeman waved it to a stop. “You get home and tell her,” he said. “And get your face fixed. What’s your address?” He added to the cabby, “You take the gentleman to the address he tells you right now and no place else. And take him alone. Don’t pick up any more riders.”

Gregory’s mind whirled in high gear. There was a quiet little bar on N Street, about eight blocks from his apartment, where he’d been once or twice. It was a residential neighborhood. His home address had not been on any of the identifications the policeman had seen. They didn’t know him in the bar by name, and he need never go back, after it had served him for sanctuary today. It would be empty, now, too.

He gave the driver an address that would be approximately across the street from it.

“O.K.,” said the policeman with grudging trust. “Take it easy now.” He stood watching the cab drive off. Everything happens to me, he thought wearily. Where the hell is Gus with the car?

It took more drinks than Gregory had expected before he felt ready to go home. He had strode through the empty bar swiftly, when he came in, to the men’s room, tossing his hat into the last and darkest booth as he passed. He looked at his face impersonally in the mirror, still sustained by elation at his cleverness in evading the policeman’s orders. His face wasn’t bad. He had a cut on one cheek, and his teeth had gone into his upper lip, which was swelling a little, but not too much. The bleeding had almost stopped. Alcohol’s a disinfectant, he thought, and tried to grin at himself reassuringly in the glass. But the strange face grimacing back at him was not reassuring. He looked away hastily and went out to his table. At the first drink he had almost shouted in pain. But it had dulled now, and every few minutes he slipped a small piece of ice up under his lip and let it rest against the cut. He had sat quietly in the semi-dark, shivering a little every now and then, but thinking almost nothing that he was able to recall

later. The radio and the slow throb of pain in his knee covered his mind with a soothing layer of monotony until the liquor began to reach him.

But now it was black dark outside, and the bar had filled. He would have to go. To do so, he would have to walk past all the couples in the other booths, past all the people laughing at the bar. He felt his lip gingerly, and it seemed to him that it must have swelled much more. Everyone would stare at him—would remember—would say to one another, "Hey, look at that guy, he's sure been in a fight."

He finished his drink hastily. "Bring me another," he said to a passing waiter. "Scotch and soda." The radio stopped for a second or two, and then a voice reported the time. Six o'clock. Ellen. Got to go home. "And a check," Gregory added, or his conscience added for him. He paid the check and sat sipping the last drink. The program changed again. Six-fifteen. Time had begun to race as the earth plunged into its own shadow. He pulled himself to his feet, setting his teeth against the explosion of pain in his knee, and put on his hat—pulled down over his eyes; his muffler—pulled as high as possible; his coat—with the collar turned up. He stalked through the crowd to the door, not looking at anyone, and at last was out in the windy night.

The air hit him like a wet towel. The pleasant anesthesia of the liquor drained away. He was only eight blocks from home and from Ellen. Even with his bad knee it couldn't take him more than ten minutes or so to walk it. And then—he saw with perfect clarity the lighted apartment-house lobby; the lighted elevator; the key in the door; the hall of their apartment; Ellen coming out of the living room, saying, "Where have you been?" Ellen. Ellen to tell about—Timmy. Terror broke over him in a wave. He couldn't go on. He stopped, head down, by a lamppost, and stood there, panting and sweating in the cold night. He felt as if he'd lost his skin and everything in the world was beating directly against the exposed nerve ends and the oozing flesh. "Got to get another drink," he said aloud. A man without a skin had a right to another drink. Without even remembering the difficult escape from the restaurant, he turned and went back in, elbowing his way through the people at the bar. "Scotch and soda," he said again. The bartender slid it up to him fast and dexterously, work-

ing like a well-designed machine in the midst of the crowd. He drank it deliberately, but it seemed to go very fast—he looked at the full glass, and when he looked again, there was just an inch of pale liquid around the ice. He had another. He knew he had another, and he remembered the last drink, too, when he paid the check and went, but whether there were any in between or not he never knew.

He walked out again at last (the crowd was thinning now) and the air didn't bother him a bit. His body was numb for a quarter of an inch deep all over, so it didn't matter about the skin. You could have stuck a pin in him (he nodded to himself in agreement as he thought this) anywhere, if you'd just been careful not to stick it in more than that quarter inch. His feet went on by themselves, a little unevenly, favoring the bad knee, which he had forgotten. And so as last he came home through every detail he had foreseen.

The lobby. The elevator. The key in the door. He lifted his head, stopping, sniffing panic again. But it was too late now. The door swung open. He was in the hall.

Ellen's voice was at him before the door had closed behind him. "John! Where have you been! You know we're supposed to be at the Morrells' today. I'm nearly crazy! When you didn't come I called the office and Rose sounded so queer and just said you weren't there and I didn't know what to—— What's happened to your mouth? It's all—— John!"

He put his hat down on the bench by the door and started over to her. It was like walking through a bog, through water, against the tide, like walking in a dream. She watched him in amazement, her fine-drawn, fine-boned face gone slack with surprise. He reached her and said, "Ellen. Timmy's dead. Killed in action."

She stood rigid and, before she pitched forward into his arms, had time for one statement. "You did this," she said, "you killed him." He felt the world slip under his feet and knew what he'd been dreading.

That was Thursday. On Friday Ellen stayed in bed, sleeping under sedatives, and Gregory went down to his office. Rose looked at his face when he came in, and opened her mouth and

closed it, before she said calmly, "I put that memo on your desk. You'll want to look at that first."

He nodded and went into his private office. He sat with his back to the light and did all his business over the telephone, seeing no one. He arranged then to be away for a few days, and left early. Saturday he took Ellen up to her family's place in Connecticut.

Rose had managed to get them a drawing room on the Boston train, although most people had trouble getting any space at all that winter. But unfortunately they had to change in Stamford and wait for the afternoon train on the Pittsfield line, north to Canaan. It was very inconvenient, but Ellen's brother simply did not have enough gas to drive across the state to meet them, or even to pick them up in Hartford. Gregory had told him he was sure he could get ration coupons to replace what Jim would use, but his brother-in-law said firmly that the roads were much too bad for anyone to drive thirty miles over and thirty miles back without chains, and that chains cut recaps to pieces, and anyway he couldn't take time off from the plant. The best he could do would be to meet the afternoon train in Canaan—that was almost fifteen miles.

"What happened to the chauffeur—what's his name—Houston?"

Jim just laughed. "You sure lead a sheltered life in Washington," he said after a minute. "Last time I heard, he was working for Chance-Vought in Bridgeport and trying like hell to look essential. No, I'll meet you in Canaan, John. Tell Ellen—tell Ellen she's to stay here as long as she wants. Tell her Mother needs her. So long, boy. You know how badly we feel about this. See you tomorrow."

They had almost two hours to wait in Stamford. "Really, John," said Ellen, "I don't see why we didn't take a later train to New York and change there." She looked hopelessly around the wind-swept platform.

"I explained that, dear," said Gregory carefully. "I thought we'd get lunch at the inn here—it's quite good—much better than railroad food—and break up the trip a little. You remember, we talked about it. Besides, I wanted you to have the drawing room for as long as possible. And it's hard to get taxis in New York,

even just from Penn Station to Grand Central. And I didn't want you getting in the crowds—I thought about it, Ellen, and told you, and we decided to do this. I thought you agreed. Come on, dear, we'll go get some lunch and have a drink. You'll feel better."

"I don't want to leave the bags."

"We'll put them inside and the ticket agent will watch them."

"No, John, I don't want to."

"Look, Ellen, you can't sit here for an hour and three quarters. It's cold outside and it's stuffy inside. Come along now."

"You go. I don't want anything to eat. I'll stay here."

"Ellen. You come along with me."

She looked back at him silently for a minute and then put her head down and walked along beside him. He piled the bags in the corner, pointed them out to the ticket agent, who grunted at him, and walked Ellen a few blocks to the inn. During lunch she did not say one word to him, and she ate almost nothing—soup, a cup of tea, and a roll. After the first silent course, Gregory went out to the lobby and bought all the newspapers he could find and read them for the rest of the meal.

The branch-line was crowded and it was impossible for them to sit together at first. But after Norwalk it stopped every ten minutes or so and people filtered off. At Danbury Gregory moved up next to Ellen and said, "Are you all right?"

"Perfectly, thank you."

"Not much longer now."

She did not answer. The train rumbled on through the early dark as if it were looking for a place to lay its weary bones down and rest. New Milford, Kent, Cornwall Bridge—and Canaan at last. Ellen wrapped her coat around her. Gregory followed her down the aisle with the bags. She was out of the train before he got the bags down the steps, looking wildly around the platform. He put the bags down and took her arm. She was shaking violently.

Her brother came out of the shadows and said, "Ellen——"

She was in his arms, clinging to him and crying uncontrollably. "Oh Jim, oh Jim," was all she could say.

"Poor old girl," he answered her gently. "Poor old girl." He nodded at Gregory over her shoulder. "Car's back there, John,"

he said. "The Cadillac. Put the bags in, and I'll bring her along."

Gregory stowed the bags in the trunk of the big car, thinking resentfully that using the Cadillac was a hell of a way to save gas. Jim and Ellen came along then.

"Want to get in back and stretch out?" asked Jim.

"No, in front with you," said Ellen as simply as a child.

"O.K. Pass me the robe from back there, John. Thanks. You'd better get in back, boy. Road's too icy to ride three in front. I've got to have room to maneuver."

Gregory got in back. "It must be a bad car to handle on ice," he said. "Eats a lot of gas, too, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," said Jim amiably. "More comfortable for Ellen than the Ford or the station wagon though. O.K., my lads, here we go. Ellen, Marion wanted me to explain that she didn't come along because I drove straight from the plant. We're all hoping you'll settle down and stay for at least a month. Mother'll be overjoyed to have you. She misses getting South, and she's really not up to going out much this weather. It'll be like a tonic for her to have you for company. Marion's so tied down with the house—we never know from one day to the next whether we'll have any help or not——"

"Don't tell me something's happened to Amelia!" said Ellen with her first sign of animation.

"Well, you could hardly call Amelia help any longer. Oh, she putters around and looks after Mother's things—fixes her breakfast tray and so on—but the poor old thing's almost more trouble than she's worth. Marion expects to get some people now, after the holidays, but——"

In the back seat, John Gregory leaned back and closed his eyes. Jim's talk flowed on, Ellen answering more and more often. He felt very tired, very far off, an impersonal intelligence moving bodiless through the atmosphere. Let Ellen stay here, he thought. It would be good for her. Let her stay a month—as long as she wanted.

It was the first time in his life he had ever felt so about Ellen and her family. He'd never relinquished her to them before without experiencing a brassy aftertaste of resentment and humiliation. He knew what it was—he'd fought it for years—but it had always returned. Till now. It was the resentment, the so common,

so ordinary resentment, of a poor man who'd married a rich girl; the resentment of a boy out of the middle class for his wife's extravagant background; resentment of Ohio against cultivated New England. It was a cheap emotion, he knew that very well. And he'd fought it and subdued it pretty much—he'd been proud of himself sometimes. Even Ellen had been proud of him. But of course they all knew he was fighting it, they all knew it existed, and so no victory over it could really settle the matter and heal the difference between himself and Jim, for instance. And it was always cropping up in odd places where he had not expected it, spoiling what should have been pleasure and pride in his wife. He didn't ride well, for instance. Where would he have learned to ride well? He could stay on a horse, looking a little ungainly and awkward, if nothing very surprising happened. But Ellen—senators' wives from the hunting counties of the South watched her with envy. And he'd never learned to shoot. And he could read French and German and Spanish—but Ellen was the hit of diplomatic parties. Ellen was fluent and funny in three languages and knew how old a title was and how much it meant—it was a great help to him in Washington, but how he hated it in Connecticut.

But now it seemed to him that it would be wonderful for Ellen to spend at least a month here. She would be better away from him for a while, away from the man to whom she had said, "You did this, you——" It had been hysteria, of course. But now, for a while, till it passed, she was better away from him. She had stayed in Norfolk from time to time without him, in the heat of Washington summers (though usually, dutifully, she'd taken a cottage in the Virginia hills, where he could commute or at least come for week ends), and every time, she'd grown bored with her family, eager to get back to him. Her return (particularly when he did not go up to get her) had always become a lovely, aching repetition of their first discovery of each other. Her returns had made up to him—not quite, but almost—for his loneliness while she was away.

The routine of the big household would be good for her too—comfortable, sunk in tradition, invaded by no new faces, only by friends of twenty or thirty years' standing with whom Ellen had gone to school. They drove him crazy, all of them—but they

would be good for Ellen now: Jim and Marion, their daughters, old Mrs. Talcott, the servants (never less than five when John had been there before; he could not imagine the Talcotts servantless), and possibly, settling in for a month at a time, other Talcotts—cousins, aunts, Ellen's younger sister from California. Yes, it was the place for Ellen now.

The car stopped, but Gregory sat still for a minute, clinging to peace and the quiet dark. Then Jim came around the car and helped Ellen out. The big whitewashed brick house glowed gently before him. It was time to get out and go show his grief to Ellen's family. He set his teeth hard and followed his wife and her brother to the door.

It snowed Sunday. Mrs. Talcott worried about the fact that no one went to church, glancing quickly at Ellen as she spoke. But Ellen quite obviously didn't want to go. She and Jim played chess in front of the fire in the living room. (Most of the house was icy, and the fireplaces ate cords of wood all winter because of fuel-oil rationing.) Ellen was dressed in blue, a tweed skirt and a pair of matching sweaters of a soft delicate wool. She always had sweaters like that, in dozens of colors. The only sign she showed of anything out of the ordinary was that she would not listen to news broadcasts. Jim told Gregory to use the radio in the library so that Ellen would not have to listen. The library had not been heated all winter, and Gregory sat through the numerous Sunday programs he had to hear, shivering and feeling that the only appropriate news would be the movement of the latest glacier. In between broadcasts he helped Marion Talcott with the housework. Jim had spoken quite truly. The Talcotts had no help whatsoever, except for Amelia, who was past any usefulness at all save to consult and converse with old Mrs. Talcott. The two of them had very definite ideas about the duties of servants, the unfortunate result of which had been the departure, just before Christmas, of the couple Marion had been humoring and hanging onto. Another couple was due during the next week from an agency in New York, but Marion was now almost completely defeatist about their reaction to her mother-in-law. The four Talcott girls had gone back to boarding school and college.

"Honestly," said Marion while she and Gregory were finishing

up the luncheon dishes, "it's the only way I can deal with the problem. Delia and Jane are much too young to be away at school, but I simply cannot manage the house with them home. Mother Talcott just doesn't realize—she keeps saying she misses them—as if I didn't miss them! But it's all I can do to get them to tidy up their rooms when they're here."

"It's awfully hard on you, Marion, I know," said Gregory. "You're the one it really hits."

"Oh, Jim's wonderful—such a help. He even wants to cook. But of course what he knows how to cook is T-bone steak two inches thick, or brook trout——" And Marion pushed the hair back out of her eyes with the back of her hand and laughed.

"Well, I'm afraid I'm no cook," said Gregory. "But if there's any job I can do——"

"Well," said Marion without hesitation, wringing out her dishcloth and drying her hands, "well, if you really want to——"

"Of course."

"We do need some more wood inside for the fires. And I'm afraid I don't know how much is cut. I haven't been out to the woodshed for a week. There's an ax out there. Do you think——"

"Fine!" Gregory was a little doubtful about the heartiness he managed to get into his voice, but Marion was past caring. "I haven't chopped any wood for thirty years, but I'll do my best."

So Gregory split wood all afternoon, and Marion went upstairs and slept for an hour and came down to start supper, and Amelia brought in tea in the Royal Doulton set, and Mrs. Talcott poured, and Jim and Ellen played chess, and no one listened to the radio, and the news sections of the Sunday paper went into the fire.

The next day Jim went off to work at eight o'clock in the Ford, and Marion counted laundry and dusted. Ellen, her mother, and Amelia were smitten with a spasm of turning out drawers and looking at things Mrs. Talcott had owned for forty years. Gregory went for a walk.

"Will you be back for lunch?" asked Marion, kneeling in the middle of the upper hall, surrounded by Irish linen sheets. "I'm terrified to send these out, I know they'll rip them, but Mother won't sleep in cotton, and they have to be changed at least twice a week, and I *really* can't wash sheets. I just can't, John."

"No, no, don't worry about me. I'll take a long tramp and pick up a bite someplace. I want to stretch my legs. Do me good."

"I'm sure it will," said Marion. "Oh, John, you don't happen to have your ration books with you, do you?"

"Why—I suppose Ellen——"

"I just thought, if you had them right in your pocket, and if you happened to pass a place that had butter——"

"I'm not going into town," said Gregory firmly. "And anyway, they don't know me. If they won't give any to you, they certainly won't give any to me."

"No, I suppose not," said Marion, defeated. "Have a good walk." But she was already deep in the face towels.

Gregory pulled on a pair of his brother-in-law's boots, climbed into Jim's leather jacket (not much too big, with a sweater under it), and set out. He hated borrowing things, but it hadn't occurred to him to bring any country clothes. The day was brilliant. The snow that the sun had melted had crusted over into ice and held his weight except in the drifted hollows. The sky was the very essence of blue. But the native cedars were mysterious against it in the long light of the southing winter sun, wrapping a secret in their copper-green branches. He walked up the hill back of the house, across the pasture to the woods. Here, after floundering a bit in the deep snow, he came out on an old wood road and followed it up over the crest. It came down into another little valley, new country that he did not know, that did not belong to the Talcotts. The pines were dull green and the oaks and maples worn brown. Here and there a laurel stood frostbitten above the flood level of the snow.

The road came out on an old plank bridge and, crossing it, joined another, where the tracks of a car or two showed. Gregory stopped on the untraveled side of the bridge, not yet willing to walk where anyone else had been. The wind did not reach down here. It was only a wild noise shaking the branches at the top of the hill behind him. Here the sun was warm. Under the bridge the water of a little stream ran black. It froze again on the other side, but the swift pace of the current melted it in the cold shadow under the bridge, where it would have liked best to rest.

Gregory leaned against the half-rotted board fence on the bridge and watched it. I wonder exactly how cold it is, he thought

idly. Not thirty-two degrees. Or does running water have to be colder than that to freeze? It has to be thirty-two degrees, for a thing to get cold enough to freeze. The silly rhyme repeated itself several times in his head. Why thirty-two degrees exactly? How arbitrary of God. Or Nature. Or Whatever. Or is it not arbitrary? Is thirty-two degrees something very important? A place where things change? Thirty-two degrees for water. What temperature for humans? What is the freezing point, the changing point, where we can stop and rest? Why must I flow on, under the bridge, when I want so to stop?

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it. The sun was very warm, and he felt quiet, almost as if he might relax. He had used the last match in the pack, and he tossed the empty pack toward the water. It missed and fell on the edge of the ice. Suddenly he was insanely irritated. The match pack lay there trembling on the edge of the current that would carry it out of sight under the ice. But he had missed, it would not go. It was the only ugly human thing in this little bowl in the hills, the symbol of all the blots and dirt of civilization. He had brought it there and had not hidden it. It was the focus of the whole valley. It was betrayal of his presence and his good will, the tiny symbol of evil. Always evil. All the things he did, all the good intentions, issued into this—evil, and ugliness, and the inefficiency that did not hide them, and so betrayed him. He picked up a lump of ice and threw it at the match pack. The ice under it broke, the water ran a little wider, the match pack was gone.

There was so much for him to do. He was always so busy. It was hard to watch everything, follow up everything, make sure of all the results—you couldn't do it, in his kind of work. These poll-takers were all right for some kinds of jobs; they could bring you figures to two decimal places. But how could you get figures on *how much* people hated the Germans? Or the Japs? It was regretfully agreed by everyone that no poll could measure intensity of emotion. Not really. They had tried. But then the questions had to be angled, and you couldn't trust what you got. Besides, you never could tell when you'd run into irrelevant personal causes that spoiled the general picture—families that had lost boys, for instance.

I wonder if Timmy ever remembered that summer we went

to Maine. Ellen had lost the baby, and Timmy and I went alone. He must have been seven. Or eight. Old enough to swim. How cold the water was there. We dropped a thermometer in off the rocks once and couldn't believe that it was as much as fifty-eight. We stayed with Dave and Joan Lewis and sailed in their sloop. Dave let Timmy steer. Or whatever you do to a boat. Steer doesn't sound right. Or does it? "Push the tiller toward the sail if you want to come into the wind." Timmy seemed to forget all about that summer later. Of course it's always hard to tell with children just what they do remember. Intensity of emotion.

I shall not have any more children now. I am done and through and sterile.

I never understood why Ellen lost the baby. She's always been so healthy. And never, after that— As if we'd lost all our chances when the one bad thing happened. The finger of God.

I did well enough after that. That was when I began to do well, really.

There was a story I read somewhere long ago about a man who ate his children.

How can you know? How can anyone judge? They seemed happy, and everything went so well. And when the war started this was such a good break, this job.

But, Ellen, he has to go. How can I help it? First of all, he wouldn't let me. And secondly, I couldn't. There's no reason. It's not as if he were a pre-med student. They'll take the pre-meds in six months anyway. How can I stop it? I can't. The draft board's watching for anything like that. It would be the worst thing in the world for the boy to have his father try to use influence for him. To say nothing of the position it would put me in. I'm the guy who tells people why their boys have to go, remember? Do you think I'm happy about it? Do you think I feel any different from you?

She didn't say anything more, then. She stopped talking about it. I guess she never really changed underneath.

To tell me like that. "You killed him, you did this, you killed him, you did this, you killed him——"

How could I stop it?

Am I responsible? Am I my brother's keeper? You could ask that when it was one man who had been killed. But how can you

ask it for all the dead? For all the dead boys? How many now? How many thousand? It becomes absurd.

He's no different from anyone else, Ellen. So many have died. Am I responsible for all of them? Will you tell me I killed all of them? Don't you see, it becomes absurd. You must see the whole picture. You must see our place in the whole picture. The fact that Timmy died is just—a fact. We must accept it. We must learn to live with it. We must not blame each other.

I always wanted more children.

What did he think, I wonder, about—about us all back here? They're bitter, a lot of them. We do the best we can—— Look, we know we're not perfect, but we do the best we can. The young are impatient and angry. When they get to be our age——

But Timmy will never get to be my age. Timmy is dead.

He put both hands on the rail of the bridge and hung on, as if he'd been hit in the face. The numbed mind had finally delivered the message, four days late, in spite of all the fences he had put up. He held onto the bridge and gasped in the icy air, all thought turned into dark turmoil, timeless as torture, eternal and infinite in the minutes he stood there. He was frozen to the fence as if an electric current sealed his hands on it.

It took an external event, in fact, to free him, an event as flat and two-dimensional as a movie. A car came along the road on the other side of the bridge, turned to cross it toward him, and then with a curious lurch slid off the road and buried one wheel in the snow. These things, as he watched them, made no more sense to Gregory than would have any other changing pattern of shape and color.

A man got out of the car. He was dressed in high laced boots, heavy trousers, and a warm shabby jacket. He came around to look at the trouble he was in.

It was then that Gregory found himself walking across the bridge as he would have walked at that moment toward the devil himself. With the motion, some command of himself began to come to him again, and he even recognized his voice as it said, "Can I help you get out?"

The man looked him over thoughtfully. "Guess so," he said.

They sweated together for fifteen minutes in the bright sun. Finally, when Gregory had given up shoving from in front and

tried helping the rear wheel on the ditched side get a purchase, the chains caught and the car pulled itself out.

"That's a bad place," said Gregory, panting.

"Turns so quick chains can't save you," said the man. "Well, guess I'll have to go round if I'm going to get up to Nichols'. Much obliged to you. Can I take you a piece where you're going?"

Gregory looked around the little valley. It lay silent now, the quiet turning thoughtfully in over itself, sealing down the pain he had felt there. But he knew in a moment of panic that all the emotions he had felt still lingered here, heavy-winged, unable to fly over the circling hills. Let him be alone again here, and the carrion vultures of terror and shame would settle once more on their victim, would sharpen their harpy beaks on his heart. He must get out—out to where he could see and would be no longer hemmed in.

He nodded, grunted his thanks, and climbed into the car.

The man drove slowly, sitting well forward, as if to help a balky horse up a hill. They jounced along the road and left the valley behind. Gregory drew a deep breath and wiped his face. A link in one chain had broken and the metal strummed violently against the fender. Its maddening rhythm provided him with a new beginning, a place he did not have to remember behind. The spell of repetition restored him bit by bit to himself. The road began to climb slightly; the car panted. Then, as they came round a bend, a huge dairy farm revealed itself. The barns were white and green instead of the usual red. A man in ear muffs was standing by the mailbox. He waved a couple of letters when he saw the car, and the man driving stopped, muttering something under his breath. It was the first time he had spoken since they had started.

The man by the mailbox came around the car to the driver's side and knocked at the window. The driver lowered it a grudging two inches. His inexpressive face had now assumed what Gregory guessed must be the one expression it was used to wearing—hangdog sullen resentment.

"Mail for me?" he asked.

"Sure," said the other man. "Got it right here." He grinned

maliciously. "Lucky you stopped back, Tom." He looked across Tom at Gregory and winked.

"Let's have it," said Tom.

"Got stuck just this side of the bridge, I suppose. Hm? This—gentleman help you out?"

"That's about the size of it," said Gregory uncomfortably.

"Told you you couldn't get through, Tom. Don't know why you got to be so pigheaded. Seems as if all your poor old brother Henry has to do is to say you can't do something, you got to go off and try it. I knew you——"

Tom growled in his throat, stopping Henry in mid-regret. "How about my letters?" he asked.

"Why, sure. You want 'em now? You'll be late over to Nichols' if you stop to read 'em."

"—— Nichols'," said Tom.

"I'll get out here," said Gregory. "Thanks for the lift." He shook himself, stamped his feet on the frozen road, feeling wide awake now, observant, interested, and ready to be alone.

Tom only growled.

"Thank you very much for helping my brother," said Henry politely. He handed the letters through the window. The car shook and leaped out between Gregory and Henry as Tom pushed the gas down. He hit a bump just before a curve hid him and swayed perilously, but did not lose the road.

"Tom's excitable," said Henry thoughtfully. "I have to keep an eye on him." He looked Gregory up and down carefully. "You staying around here?" he asked.

"Mhm," said Gregory. An idea had suddenly come to him. "Quite a place you've got here. What kind of cattle?"

"Ayrshire," said Henry, but he pronounced it Asher, and Gregory was puzzled for a moment.

"Fine milkers," he said, however, feeling this would be safe.

"Fourth best milker in the country lives right here. Like to see her?"

"I certainly would," said Gregory. They went into the barn together. "I guess one of the things you don't have to worry about is where you're going to get enough butter," he said casually.

"You'd be surprised," said Henry, "the trouble we got about that. This OPA—they snoop around on us like it was a crime to

be in business. We're mighty careful about who we sell to. Got to be. Got to have our records in order." He slid his eyes over Gregory again. Fencing slowly and carefully, they walked through the cow barn, bargaining as precisely as if they were playing five-finger exercises together.

Half an hour later, when Gregory left, he had two pounds of butter—price, a dollar a pound. It was an insane little victory he had won, but it made him feel like himself again. Marion would certainly be glad to see him, he thought. Jim would be surprised. Mrs. Talcott could really have butter dripping from her muffins at tea tonight. Even Ellen——

Even Ellen—— He could make a funny story out of it, of Tom and Henry, and the "Asher" cows, and the bargaining. It might amuse her.

He swung over the ridge of the hill, glancing quickly around at all the landscape, measuring it, taking it in, carrying his life warily through it, in the exact center of the horizon's circle.

CHAPTER 2

Marion stood by the kitchen table looking at him in honest astonishment. "But you didn't have the ration books, John," she said. "How could you get any butter?"

It was the one thing he hadn't allowed for, and he looked back at Marion as nonplused as she was herself. To look her in the eye and say, "It's black-market butter," would be as impossible as to recite an obscene limerick to her. Marion, with friendly righteousness (she never meant to be unfriendly), had reported to the Norfolk ration board a neighbor who offered her a quarter of beef from one of his own steers. Remembering this, Gregory slumped against the kitchen door. He was physically tired (he'd been walking almost all day), and he felt that Marion was going to be too much for him.

At that moment, through the other door from the pantry, came Ellen with an ice bucket in her hands, and set it down by the sink. She glanced at her husband in the doorway and said, "Want a drink, John?"

He straightened—first with a jerk, then slowly so as not to frighten her. It was the first time she'd spoken to him in friendship since—Thursday night. He tried to sound casual. "Thanks. What are you making?"

"Old-fashioned. Is that all right?" She went over to the ice-box and took a tray of ice cubes out.

"Fine. Just what I want." He had a vague memory, after he had spoken, that Marion had been being difficult; and an idea, in the back of his mind, suggested that this would be a good time to mutter something about washing up, and go. But he was watching Ellen and he could not go. Her quick fingers were dropping the ice cubes into the bucket. She had beautiful hands. Her face was gently absorbed in what she was doing, as if any

work for her hands relieved the drag of grief on her bewildered mind, her troubled heart. Occupational therapy, he thought. Perhaps I ought to take up weaving.

"Ellen," said Marion.

Oh God Almighty, thought Gregory, here it comes. Here comes the black market. If he had had a gun—or preferably, he thought, a death ray—in his hands at that moment, it would have been almost impossible not to kill Marion.

Her voice was surprised, slightly resentful, and inexorable as fate. Nothing could stop her. "Do you have your ration books, by any chance?"

Ellen shut off the water in the sink and turned to look at her. Gregory waited. "Why?" said Ellen. Gregory blessed the thread of resentment in Marion's voice. Accusation of error, direct or implied, was something Ellen did not put up with.

"Why!" said Marion, more surprised, more resentful now. "I should think it was a perfectly obvious request when you're staying here. Most people would have passed them over to me already. But I suppose with only the two of you to buy for, you don't realize what it's like to worry about a big family."

Ellen's mouth moved, but she didn't say anything, and Marion went on without realizing what she had said. "It's not just the ordering, you see, it's the planning. I have to know how many points I have to count on each week if I'm to use them properly. Besides——"

"Besides what?" said Ellen noncommittally. She was leaning back against the sink, looking at Marion as if she were a rare and rather repulsive zoological specimen.

"Besides," said Marion loudly, furious righteousness overcoming her, "besides, John has brought this back with him, and he won't tell me where or how he got it, and I refuse——"

"Brought what back?" asked Ellen.

Marion pointed dramatically to the slightly battered package on the table. "Two pounds of butter!" she said.

Ellen's shoulders quivered slightly. "Really?" she said. With a little push from her hands (as if her body were able to take pleasure again in its movements), she left the sink and went over to the table. "How very enterprising of him," she said, picking up the package and unwrapping the brown paper. There was a large

dent in the top print of butter where, at some moment during the day, Gregory had apparently rested his elbow. Ellen's hair fell forward about her face as she looked down at it. Then her eyes came up, sparkling with mischief, looking straight across to Gregory. "Epaminondas," she said, "I declare you ain't got de sense you was born with. Dat's no way to carry butter. De way to carry butter is, first you wrap it up in leaves. And den you cool it in de water, and you cool it in de water——"

"Yes, mammy," said Gregory. This was Ellen, his darling Ellen. He could say no more to her. The shock of her reappearance was too great. Enchanted and terrified, he could only watch and hope she had come back for good. Help me, help me, said Ellen's eyes gazing at him, I need your help to become myself again, I can't do it alone! But he gave her no help, he could only watch and hope.

She turned back to the tray and the glasses. "Go wash your hands," she said. "I'll make the drinks. Where *did* you get it, John?"

And now that necessity was really upon him it was easy to answer. He lied, simply and convincingly. It had not occurred to him to lie only to Marion. But to Ellen—his dear, his love—the lie came out without thinking. "Good Samaritan stuff," he called back casually over his shoulder. "I helped a man get his car out of a ditch, and he turned out to be a dairy farmer." He felt perfectly satisfied, even proud, letting the door close behind him. Every word he had said was perfectly true, and it should not only satisfy Marion. It should heap on her head, like coals of fire, the idea that a free gift of butter had been taken only because she had asked for it that morning. Now why hadn't he thought of telling her that before, before Ellen came in? It was so obvious. To lie by telling the truth—it was the oldest, most useful technique in the world. But although he would allow himself to feel no shame, his fatigue came back. He was so tired, so tired. And when he got downstairs again, Ellen had relapsed into her shrouded indifference, and all evening long talked to no one, save to answer Jim when he spoke to her.

Next morning Gregory went back to Washington. The alarm clock shrilled him awake at six-thirty in the pitch-black night, and he rose stupidly at its command, dressed clumsily, closed his bag

on dirty shirts and crumpled ties, and went downstairs. Jim was in the kitchen making coffee. Marion had squeezed orange juice the night before. He drank a glass and felt his stomach contract with horrified surprise at being assaulted by breakfast in the dead of night.

"Put some toast on, will you?" said Jim. "The bread's right there. There. Right in the breadbox. No, the red one. Here."

"Oh," said Gregory, and put the bread in. Fortunately it was an automatic toaster. He managed to butter the toast without dropping any and gave it to Jim.

"Don't you want some?" asked Jim. "You won't get anything on the train, and it doesn't get to New York till eleven-thirty."

There was an appreciable pause before Gregory's mind registered Jim's question and he answered, "No, thanks. I don't want any."

Jim watched him for a moment as he leaned awkwardly against the kitchen table. John Gregory had never learned to carry his height well. All the lines were smoothed out of his face by sleep. It was a mask. For once you could not tell, looking at him, whether he was stupid or quick, whether in an argument he would tread on your heels with his answers, or sit impregnable behind a concrete wall of prejudiced assumptions and refuse to listen. You could tell nothing about intelligence from that stunned, drugged face, still surrendered to sleep. And yet—you could tell something else. More important, perhaps. You could tell what kind of a man he was. Though there was no wit showing in Gregory's face at all, you could tell that it was his wits that he lived by.

For almost the first time in his life, Jim felt a stir of pity inside him for this cranky, unsatisfactory brother-in-law. He looks sad, he thought. This must have hit him hard somewhere underneath. It's too bad he doesn't know how to handle it. It's too bad he never trusted us. Funny he can't see that just because we love Ellen, we're ready to trust him and take him in. But Gregory's weary face, wiped clean of the action of his brain, still spoke to Jim of the things beneath, still said to Ellen's brother after twenty-four years, "You can't trust me. I'm not your friend. The beloved woman between us is no bond, but a division. I will work to betray you in her heart whenever I can."

"Have some coffee," said Jim. "We ought to leave in ten minutes or so."

"Thanks." Gregory took the cup and wandered over to the window. But it was still three quarters of an hour till dawn. There was no streak of light in the sky, and when he put his forehead against the glass, and his shadow shielded his eyes from the light behind him, he could see the glassy winter stars still splintering the sky.

Jim turned on the water in the sink and began to rinse the orange juice glasses and his coffee cup.

Gregory put down his cup on the kitchen table and walked over to the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Jim behind him. "I'm going to get the car right now. We haven't——"

"I'll be right back," said Gregory, let the door swing to behind him, and started up the stairs. On the upper landing he paused, counting the doors in the soft light of the hall. Suppose he walked in on Marion, or on Mrs. Talcott? No, he knew of course behind which door Ellen was sleeping. It was just a trick of his brain, to try to frighten him by suggesting he could make a mistake. But perhaps she would not want to see him?

She's my wife, he said to himself, walking toward the third door.

He opened it and went in with that lost chance of last night, that appeal he had met with a lie, for company. The room was icy, the windows flung wide. In the light from the hall, only the top of Ellen's head could be seen between the pillow and the quilt. He shivered going over to her and bent over the bed.

"Ellen," he said softly. She did not stir. He hung over her, watching. He knew how warm her bare shoulder would be if he slipped his hand under the covers to stroke it. He could almost feel the silken flesh. His hand burned with the cold as it hung back. She needs to sleep, he told himself. I must not wake her. "Ellen," he said again. She would not know he had spoken; she was far off and dreaming of happiness. But he would speak anyway, to ears that would hear without hearing, to the mind that would listen to his words without memory. "I must go now," he said. "Good-by. Rest and be happy. Come to me—when you want to. I must go now, dear. Good-by." His hand hovered and he turned away.

Ellen threw herself over on her back, both arms stretched above her head. "The glass is broken," she said. "I can't see." Her face twisted in anger (his breath stopped in his nostrils) and then relaxed again. She turned on one side, curled herself warmly beneath the covers, and slept sound.

Below him he heard Jim's step in the hall. "John!" he called in a stage whisper that shook the house. Ellen did not hear it. With an effort like ripping the bandage from a wound, Gregory turned away from her, closed the door, and went down to Jim.

Coming into Grand Central was like coming back to life. The senile train had pattered along through the morning in a mildly addled way, like someone's great-aunt looking for her knitting. But New York, full of rush and sinus damp, was a new world. Gregory really woke up and shook himself. He checked his bag, went down to the Oyster Bar and ordered lunch, and called Rose in Washington while he waited. She had a plane seat all arranged for him. Well-fed, with an armful of papers and a number-two priority, he was a very different passenger in the afternoon from the unco-ordinated bundle of fatigue and dreams that had climbed onto the train at Canaan in the faint light of the late dawn. He went straight to his office from the air terminal. Rose had neat lists of phone calls waiting for him, abstracts of everything he ought to know, appointments scheduled for the next day, and a dozen letters written for him. He spent most of the late afternoon rewriting the letters (Rose knew pretty well what he wanted to say, he had to admit that, but she had a habit of lapsing into Business English), and took Rose out to dinner. They went to a place where, if you were an undersecretary and they knew you, you could get tough steak. They had three cocktails apiece, and Rose told him all the newest talk that couldn't be written down, and they laughed about other people in the government. After dinner Rose said she would go back to the Department and finish the letters. Gregory had intended to go back, too, and begin drafting a memo for the Secretary. But when he stood up from the table he knew he was too tired.

"Go on home," said Rose. "You won't get anything done tonight."

"Well—I guess I will. I got up at six-thirty this morning."

Rose tucked the corners of her mouth in neatly so as not to smile. She got up at six-thirty every morning and was in the office by ten minutes of eight. Gregory knew that. He'd just forgotten. When they were working really hard—the time a Senate investigation threatened, for instance—he was down by a little after eight himself, and put in twelve hours a day three or four times a week. He was tired and upset now. And six-thirty did seem awfully early on cold winter daylight-saving mornings.

"I'll drop you off then," he said, "and be down early tomorrow. I am tired."

The doorman amazingly had a cab for them. Gregory helped her in and dropped wearily in a corner. The street lamps flickered in at them. Rose suddenly felt so tired herself she could have cried. I want to go home too, she almost shrieked at him, I want to sleep! But she could not tell him. She was afraid of the wave of self-pity that swept over her, afraid of the tears that stung her eyes in the intermittent dark. But I never feel like this, she said to herself, never! It was as if his fatigue—no, something more—his despair—had infected her. She wanted to get away from him, catch her breath, wipe her eyes, and go home.

It seemed to her, though, that the silence was dangerous. She might sob if it continued. She asked him the first question that came into her head: "Ellen's all right?" Hearing it, she was appalled.

Gregory stiffened. "Yes," he said. "She's—she needs rest." It was a completely irrelevant and misleading description of Ellen's state of mind, he thought, but he couldn't dredge up one other thing to say.

"I'll get out here," said Rose. The corner where they had stopped was two blocks from the Department, but Rose could get a trolley there. She hoped he wouldn't notice they hadn't reached the Department. If she stayed with him any longer, she was afraid she would go all to pieces.

"All right," said Gregory. He opened the door on his side for her, but did not get out. She scrambled past him, like a rabbit out of a trap. The door slammed, the cab went on, Gregory leaned back in his corner. Only one thought veined the great swollen lump of soreness and fatigue that was his brain—"Rose wants to hurt me too, I guess!" He was amazed at this, constant,

progressive amazement that matched "It can't be true" with "It must be so." "Rose wants to hurt me too." If it was not true, it was at any rate becoming very familiar.

The elevator man said politely, "Evening, Mr. Gregory." As he spoke, Gregory remembered that he'd left his suitcase behind. Stuffed with dirty laundry, it stood in the closet of his office. All the way up in the elevator the picture of it there infuriated him. He tried to tell himself it didn't matter—he had another razor, there must be a new toothbrush around somewhere—but his rage rose. He opened the door of his apartment. The fusty, dusty, musty smell that greeted him added to his fury. Gone only four days, and this was the way he came home to find it! The maid must have gone off on a spree that wasn't over yet. He snapped on the hall lights, snapped on the living-room lights, and stalked in.

Across the room, on top of the radio, his son's picture looked back at him. He stood in the doorway, pierced by its gaze as if he'd never seen it before. Then, with a shock more immediate than memory, he was back in the past—years ago when Timmy was a baby, standing over his crib and staring down at the sleeping face, trying to identify the spirit within from the delicate outer shell. His mother's lovely arched eyebrows and molded temples. His father's nose and chin—a little too much bone there. But whose mouth? Whose eyes? He could never tell. They belonged to no one but Timmy; they were his personal contribution to the family pattern (that was, of course, always the forced conjunction of two patterns—mother's, father's). Gregory saw life, for a moment then, as a tide rip, forces always meeting, children thrown up like standing waves, dynamism meeting itself and—unable to move forward or back—producing something new, a shape projected into a new dimension. That had been Timmy—his one chance. Now the tide had turned and the water lay slack all around him.

Timmy, Timmy, Timmy! Gregory caught the back of the chair before him and bent his long body double over his agonizing hands. There was no more Timmy. Gone forever—all he had done, all he had never tried. Blown out like a flame, leaving the dreadful dark behind that would never again be split with light.

But all Gregory thought, really, was the name. Which meant all this and more. Which was his only lament.

He stood there some minutes—he never knew how long—and then went over to the bar and poured a tumbler half full of whisky. Carrying it very carefully, he went out of the living room, snapping the light off, leaving Timmy's picture alone in the dark. He wished, as he did so, that he were strong enough to cross the room, pick it up, and hide it in a drawer. But he could not touch it. He went into the bedroom (dusty, fusty, musty), opened the window, drank his hooker of whisky, undressed sketchily, and fell asleep.

Morning was a bad taste in his mouth, a hard shower with a stiff bath brush, and a hunt for clean shirts. The maid hadn't come by eight-thirty. He stalked out (past the living-room door where the harsh gray light had reduced Timmy's picture to an old, not very good photograph) and told the elevator man what to say to the colored girl if she showed up—"That no-good lazy bitch, the place is a pigsty, where's she been? I know some of the liquor's missing." The elevator man listened in silence, reducing it all to one sentence, "He sure was mad." ("Ah," said Marietta when she came in, "he's always mad. I don't pay him no mind. My sister's been sick. I left him a note, right out on the kitchen table. He didn't look—too grand to set foot in my kitchen, that's him. What for would I drink his liquor? He's drunk it himself, and don't want to say so. He better not talk to me like that, though.") She laughed with real amusement. "Does he think I can't get no other job? Didn't she come back with him?" "No, he was alone.")

He went into a drugstore for breakfast, on the street with the trolley line. The orange juice was bitter; the toast was cold, sodden with margarine.

The papers said the German salient was broken.

It was the first objective message from the outside world that had really reached him since the news of Timmy's death. Back in those days, before the crevasse had opened across his life, the bulge had still been swelling outward from La Roche and St. Hubert, Liège was in danger and beyond Liège, Antwerp. And in spite of everything, in spite of knowing the war was nearly won, there would come rumors from the pockets of memory of the

other time—the time when the bulge swelled and burst, and the wave swept across to the sea, curled back up to Dunkirk. But now—without elation, indeed with a touch of shame because it had been necessary to call on faith—now everything one knew had been proved true: the Germans were halted and starting reluctantly to fall back. It translated itself into work for him to do. He gulped his coffee, raced out and just caught a car, and was, when he arrived at the Department, a man with a job that he could do well.

Now, for six weeks, he was those two people—an efficient technician doing his work thoroughly and even with imagination, directing the organization under him, correlating the work, making sense out of gossip and rumors and half-thought-out ideas, he was that. And he was, besides, a lost soul. He tried not to be alone. Waking in the morning, he would resolve to engage himself for every evening, and he did indeed have dinner with many people he did not particularly like or want to see. But in the office the other person, the worker, would interrupt his plans, would make him refuse a party that would interfere with the job, would send him home alone with a brief case full of papers to be gone over. January ended and February dragged by—and now the Russians had driven to the Oder and the western armies were pouring toward the Rhine—Germany was crumbling away in bigger and bigger lumps. Six Marines raised a flag on Iwo Jima. Work piled up on Gregory's desk; he sprayed his opposite numbers in other departments with letters and memos; the line he advocated began to show up in newspaper stories. A picture magazine interviewed him.

Three times a week Nembutal put him to sleep. The other nights he used whisky. It was impossible to get any good whisky, but after the first swallow, the raw stuff that he could buy numbed his taste and became only the blessed assurance of oblivion. He slept dull and drugged and did not remember his dreams. Only sometimes he would jerk awake in the dark and lie alone, feeling himself no person, no integer, just a distortion of energy, a kink in space, a function, not a thing, spinning in the vast empty night. Night which might at any time grow taut, tug at the edges of his being, flap like a flag in the breeze, and destroy him beyond the possibility of having existed.

The clock would strike the half-hour (some anonymous half-hour unrelated to any known time) and he would move his legs heavily under the covers in order to place himself in his body, feel his volition able to move his muscles. But the night stretched out around him, past the stars, beyond and beyond, galaxy piled upon galaxy in the emptiness of space, dribbling off into infinite velvet blackness that had no name. And against it, only the spark in the brain leaping like a night light in any breath of wind, the only hope. But if you are to sleep, you must blow it out. Blow it out. Blow out your hope, and trust yourself to the blackness to rock you in its tides, cradle you back to yourself in the impossible morning.

The clock struck. The spark leaped in the brain. He lay awake.

The next day was always bad. In the afternoon, fatigue lay like a lump at the base of his brain. Things went wrong on those afternoons. His control wore thin and shredded away, the sore spots underneath were rubbed by the telephone's ring, inflamed by the unnecessary questions, the misunderstandings of what he had already made clear, that had to be made, and made again. Until finally he would hit out, to cover his hurt and save himself from the torture. Because she was near, because she was the buffer between himself and the torment, it was always Rose at whom he struck. And always, he saw with a faint edge of pleasure, she was surprised. Every time he hurt her, she was surprised. But she had tried to hurt him, some indistinct memory justified. She had taunted him with—she had taunted him. She could blame herself now for everything she got.

Late in February a letter came from Ellen. She had not written before. He had telephoned her from the office twice a week or so, usually in the morning, on days when things were going well. They told each other how they were, Gregory gave her some inside information to pass on to Jim (she always forgot it), once in a while they exchanged gossip about friends.

So the advent of the letter was shocking. It lay on the hall table when he got home from the office in the late afternoon. He was going to a cocktail party at the Tylers', and ordinarily he wouldn't have come home first. (Luck? Nothing is luck.) But his fountain pen had hemorrhaged over his vest and trousers as he took it out to sign his mail, and he had come home to change.

The letter had come by air mail, special delivery. He picked it up and walked into the living room. It might have been flesh and blood in his hand, he could almost feel a pulse. By the window, next to Timmy's picture, he stood, wetting his lips and making up his mind to open it. (A bit of the future solid in your hand, to be learned at a jump instead of through the infinite gradualness of passing seconds, like the familiar dream of seeing the date of your death all ready on a gravestone.) He ripped it open in a spasm of panic.

"Darling," said the letter, in Ellen's graceful upright hand. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to tell his heart to stop pounding.

"DARLING,

"I have had about all I can stand of this place and will be home at the end of the week. Marion is really incredible. Poor soul, I ought to be sorry for her, but I can't help feeling that there is some baffling and unhealthy pleasure she finds in beating her brains out and working her hands to the bone. Literally, to the bone. I mean, she could put a little lotion on them, Hind's Honey or dear Mr. Winchell's variety, or something. But no. She deliberately keeps them red.

"We are enjoying all the delights of a thaw at the moment, everything is ankle deep in mud, and Mother keeps talking about the garden, and where is Turner, and we try to explain. No Turner, no gardener whatsoever this year, maybe the Collier boys to cut the lawn once a fortnight if we are all very good little Talcotts and don't forget there's a war on. But it doesn't penetrate at all. She told Jim the other day that since he obstinately refused to do anything about getting Turner undrafted, she would take it upon herself to write to the dear senator."

"But he isn't a senator any more," said Jim, attacking this from the easy end.

"Nonsense," said Mother.

"The mud keeps us in pretty well—walking is squelch, squelch, and there goes your rubber—so we have succeeded in getting thoroughly in each other's hair. Also the second couple we have had since I've been here is leaving on Saturday. Marion is taking

it like an early Christian martyr, but I have the feeling that one extra in the house does definitely make a difference, and that things may be easier if I depart. So Marcel, Hedwig, and I shall all go in a body Saturday A.M.

"Why don't you come up and meet me in New York, and let's have a week end? Can Rose get tickets for something Saturday night? Wire me about it.

"Love,
"ELLEN"

Gregory sat down on the arm of the couch, his elbows on the radio, and buried his head in his arms. He was shaking all over, and when he got up, the tears had run down his cheeks. He went into the bathroom and started the shower.

So Ellen came back. They had two days in New York together, two days in which Gregory thought he made only one mistake. That was at first meeting. She came up out of the dark train platform into Grand Central and paused, turning her head to look for him and not seeing him. He stood for a minute watching her, feeling the image of her in his brain warm gently with this new confirmation of her, this reassurance of the remembered gestures. Then he went forward and kissed her.

"Oh, John," she said, and that was all.

So he spoke, reaching into his mind for some gift to give her, like a dog bringing an unwanted slipper to its master. And his mind handed him the thing that he himself had been rejoicing over. "Isn't it wonderful," he said, "that we're across the Rhine?"

Her face was quite blank, pulling away from his shoulder. "Across the Rhine?" she said.

"At Remagen. The First made it—found a bridge——" He stopped at the sight of her face, and finished in lame justification, "It's in the papers."

"I haven't seen the papers," said Ellen. "Not lately. That's my porter, I think."

He went after the porter without looking back, agonizing in his heart. But in the taxi, on the way to the hotel, she slipped her hand through his arm and, in the rickety cab with the worn springs, they were close together.

He was very careful all week end after that. He thought occa-

sionally that Ellen was being careful too. This care, this gentleness, almost burst his heart. He wanted to thank her, to adore her, but if he did he would negate the care. He would let her know he knew. So they had two days of holiday together, loving each other carefully, banking the fire in the heart to a warm glow so that it should not burn the flesh.

At home it was easier. The war in Europe was ending. Germany went down, through March, like a bombed house collapsing room by room. In the rubbish were the curious unbelievable relics of her shame—Buchenwald, Dachau, the insane adolescent boys who fought on like wolves while the generals surrendered in all their medals. Over Tokyo now LeMay's B-29s were dropping their fire bombs. Gregory worked late. All this was not only a story to be told, but before the story was written papers must fly from hand to hand, determining what the story was, exactly, and how it should be told. Then there was the peace ahead. Roosevelt was home from Yalta. There was so much to be done in the first unseasonable burst of spring weather.

He wondered occasionally whether Ellen had "seen the papers lately."

He went through the headlines quickly at breakfast. She sat opposite him in a striped silk housecoat, spreading marmalade on her toast and drinking coffee. He folded the papers and left them behind when he kissed her and went out. He was still careful not to talk to her about the news. It was easy enough to do, there were so many other people to talk to. They called up all evening when he was home, or he called them. Above all, there was Rose. He had always trusted her instinct. When he wanted to know how something would go, what the general reaction to a story would be, he asked Rose. He had always asked her more often than Ellen. Ellen's reply was likely to be made from a point of view that would occur to absolutely no one else Gregory knew. Rose's reaction was useful. Ellen's was charming, bewildering, occasionally frightening, but never helpful. It was Ellen he loved, but Rose was the touchstone mind, reality.

It was Rose who brought him the news that all reality had ended. He was standing by his office window, looking out over the green springtime city of Washington. He had an appointment with the Secretary at four-thirty, and in a minute or two it would

be time for him to go. Rose burst in the door, leaving it open behind her. He turned in amazement even before she spoke.

"Oh, John," she said, "he's dead, the President's dead." She caught the corner of the big desk and bowed her head over it, sobbing.

"No," said Gregory, "it's not true." He walked on stiff legs to the desk and sat down behind it, leaning forward to look up at Rose's face.

She nodded hysterically, unable to speak.

"I just had a note from him, Rose, two—three days ago. He's been tired ever since Yalta—he's lost some weight—it's just a rumor——"

"Miss—Miss Timkins—called," gasped Rose. "The Secretary's gone to the White House. It's true, John, it's true. Oh! He's dead!" she finished, and threw back her head in the true keening.

Around the open door behind her, Gregory's office staff had collected, openmouthed. "The President is dead," John said to them. He stood up. "Someone—help Miss Carmody." He walked out blindly and they parted to let him by.

But Rose dashed after him and caught his arm. "John," she said, clinging to him, glaring up at him, "where are you going?"

He put her hands gently away. "I must get home to Ellen," he said. "Suppose she just turned on the radio and heard it that way? Miss—Miss Lynch, will you go home with Miss Carmody and see that she's all right? This is a shock to all of us. A dreadful shock. I—I'll see you all tomorrow."

He got a taxi and rode, stone-faced, through the blossoms and the spring warmth. He looked hard at the taxi driver, hard at the doorman, as he came home, but their faces betrayed no dread knowledge. He had a little trouble with the lock before he got the door open and went in to the cool darkened apartment. But Ellen was not there.

He was completely amazed. He walked through all the rooms looking for her. The apartment was quite empty. The colored maid had left early, leaving a note about groceries to be ordered the next day. Gregory read it and experienced an insane desire to tear it up—this silly, useless, disgusting fragment of life. He put it down carefully. It was then that he noticed his hands had begun to shake.

He went hastily back into the living room and sat down on the sofa, hiding his hands between his knees. He looked over at the radio (its top was bare now; hadn't there been something that stood there?), but he was afraid to turn it on. Perhaps the news was not officially released yet, and he would have to hear it come over the radio all over again, framed in the pompous horror of the announcer's voice. He could not bear it. So the radio and he sat in silence together as the light outside faded and the day drew to its end.

It occurred to him once that there might be work to be done at the office, the Secretary might be looking for him. It occurred to him and that was all. He felt absolutely irresponsible about any such demand. Before he could externalize his feelings and treat this event as an event, he must take its measure fully within himself. In Rome of the Republic, men of honor who could no longer permit themselves to live had killed themselves by falling on their swords. It was as if this death were a sword that he must take to his bosom, slowly, inch by inch. He was aware of fear, but his first and greatest emotion was anticipation, expectation of experience. He felt as if, for the first time, he was going to learn what grief and mourning were, and he was a little awed by such a prospect, as a boy is awed by his first experience with a woman.

His first grief? But he did not remember Tim once. Tim's death had been shattering, frightening, something to be pushed down into the darkness and hidden away. But Gregory felt now, in this long spring dusk, like a participant in a classic drama waiting to go on stage and there at once act, and learn what the action meant. If there was a meaning to Tim's death it was one he did not want to learn. "You killed him, you did this——" The words echoed for a moment in his memory and then he wrenched his mind back to the formal, noble responsibility of his grief for the dead President.

The President is dead. I knew him very well.

Really! What kind of a fellow is he? What kind—what kind—what kind——

Oh yes, I know him very well.

Oh yes, Mr. Gregory's an old inhabitant. You came to Washington in 1935, didn't you?

Nineteen thirty-four.

Really! What kind of a fellow——

Why—it's a little hard to describe—— You have to know——
Charming, yes. Magnetic. Yes.

Does he know—does he mean——

Sincere? My dear fellow——

When he gave you something you wanted, he pretended it was a favor you were doing him. "John, it's a dirty trick to put you in DPI, but——" When he took something away, he made you feel proud.

All that is nothing. It's all unimportant. Because soon I shall have to think that he's really—that it's true——

No, I don't want a drink. Not till I tell Ellen.

Where is Ellen? Why isn't she home? He got up in hasty panic, guilty because he had not been thinking of her. Where could she be? How could she not know what had happened? All over the city the flags must be at half-mast, the bells tolling, the news passed from mouth to stricken mouth. What could be keeping her? Had it been too much for her? Was she sitting alone, taking the shock alone instead of coming home to him? Where was Ellen?

Then he heard the key turn in the lock. He waited for the door to open, tense with anxiety. Did she know or would he have to tell her?

She laughed. He would have to tell her then. Probably the news had not been released, for someone else laughed too. He had a moment of terror that she had brought someone home with her, and then realized that it was merely the elevator boy unlocking the door for her. He saw her now, silhouetted against the light in the hall, her arms full of packages.

"Thank you so much, Joe. I'm just loaded down, but they won't deliver anything these days if it's under the size of a trunk. Now if you'll just put the light on—right there by the door—— Thank you ever so much. No, I'm fine now. Good evening."

She came part way into the living room where Gregory stood irresolute. By tucking her chin down on her bundles to hold them tight, she freed one hand and lit a lamp, half turned to go out, saw Gregory, and let out a little scream.

"Oh! Why, John! Why, John, what are you doing sitting there

in the dark? Goodness, darling, you scared me! I had no idea——”

“Ellen,” he said, coming forward to take the bundles, “Ellen, I have——”

“No, John, I don’t want them here, I want them in the bedroom.”

“But, Ellen, I just——”

“No, I’ve got them balanced just right. I can—— John! Stop! Oh, I told you! Now honestly——”

“Never mind, I’ll pick them up. I want——”

“Pick them up! Pick them up’s all very well, but if the perfume broke—— And it’s the only Bellodgia I’ve seen for three years—— Really, John, why you can’t let me—— Is it broken? Here, give it to me.”

“Ellen—Ellen, won’t you come and sit down for a minute? I want——”

“If you’ll just let me get these things put away, of course I’ll come and sit down. Oh dear, I’m afraid——”

“But, darling—— Oh, darling, I want to tell you something. Please——”

“Well, it can wait three minutes, I should think. If you hadn’t fussed me I’d be through now. No, it isn’t broken. Thank heaven.”

“It can’t wait.”

“Why can’t it—— Oh, very well. All right, I’m sitting down. What is it?”

“No—not like that. Oh, Ellen. Oh, Ellen, the President’s—dead.”

“Yes, I know,” said Ellen. “The cabdriver told me. Isn’t it awful?”

CHAPTER 3

He unlocked the door of his office in a great mixture of relief and of terror. He had run to it as his only refuge, his only comfort. It had seemed to him that if he could just reach this place of pure intention and energy well spent, he would be able to catch hold of his emotions. There was no question but that he had lost control of himself. He was perfectly prepared to admit that in so many words; though he would prefer not to remember *how* it had been—the shrinking of power and identity, the feeling of being caught by a strange surf that was both part of himself and completely unknown to him. But as soon as he had realized what was happening, he reminded himself, pushing the door open, he had got out. That was the right thing. He'd done the right thing, no question of it. The words had come up in his throat, his hands had quickened with a life of their own, but he had held on, held on with the last little strength that remains when you have understood that all strength is gone and that you must run away. And he had run away. Run safely with the words hardly hinted at, with Ellen's white face not reddened by the mark of his hand across it.

She should not have said those things. He tried not to remember them, stumbling across his threshold into the dark office. The door slammed behind him, and he stood for a moment trembling, waiting. Was there comfort here for him? The only refuge. If it were to fail him, where could he go? He waited in the dark and felt nothing until, because he felt nothing, the pressure of panic rose again. He groped his way toward the desk, and a metal wastepaper basket caught him in the shin. The burst of pain was, at last, a release. He felt the couch behind him and sat down there. Nursing his shin, he cursed, repeating all the profanities he had ever heard or read. They did him no good. The pain eased

by itself. The words were nothing—words only, not spells, not incantations. Why should they be? He dealt in words. They were only merchandise—so many boxes of farina, so many barrels of flour. They had lost all power to help. They had lost all power——

His words to himself, that is. Because he knew that if he had not run away his words to Ellen would have——

Would have what?

Done what hers did?

Oh yes. Oh yes.

Why, I think, he said to himself in amazement, that I will never forget this. And the inadequate understatement was almost more than he could bear. Over his crossed arms clinging to his body, his bowed head bobbed and nodded in a grotesque reproduction of agony. He was clutching himself together around his wound, as if he were trying to keep the blood from running out of his body. But it was not that kind of a wound. I have suffered a mortal injury, he thought, but I cannot die from it.

“John,” said Ellen’s voice, “face it. You might as well face it.”

Oh God, oh God, oh God. He got up in terror, gasping for breath. It was everywhere. There was no retreat, no refuge, nothing, no place left. All his places were infected. He could run nowhere that the words could not follow.

But not those words. Oh, not the end, at least. It was bad enough earlier, but then he had still been able to be angry, shocked, to react against Ellen. At the end there had been nothing but himself and the experience beating against him. Anything was better than that, even the beginning when he had at least been able to respond by hating Ellen. Ellen, his darling, so inextricably his. One mind, one flesh. Or he had thought so. He had thought so.

Another mockery. She had made that clear.

And he had loved her so.

“Yes, I know it. The cabdriver told me. Isn’t it awful?”

He hadn’t believed it. He’d sat and looked at her in blank unbelief.

“It’s almost more than you can take in,” she went on. For a moment he grasped at the words, making them into an apology for her apparent lack of feeling. It was more than she could take

in. "That's what I said to the cabby. He was terribly affected. 'I feel as if I'd lost a friend,' he kept saying. 'We won't see anyone like him again.' He was almost crying. 'It just doesn't seem real,' I said to him. And it doesn't. I suppose we ought to have expected it——"

"No!" John burst out before he could stop himself.

"No? Oh, John—you told me yourself he looked tired and you were worried about him. He never should have gone to Yalta. And Pa Watson dying——"

"He had to go. Nothing stopped him when he knew it was right to——" But he couldn't finish the sentence. He rejected tears furiously. Cheap—cheap! Sentimental! He thought of Ellen's cabdriver looking for easy sympathy from strangers. But he couldn't finish the sentence.

"Yes, dear," said Ellen sympathetically, beside him on the couch now, slipping her hand through his arm. "I know he had to. And yet you can't help thinking if he hadn't gone—even if he hadn't run—— Well. It's no good thinking about it now. Would you like a drink before you dress?"

He just looked at her, and after a minute she explained gently, "We're dining at the Fairbanks' tonight. Black tie."

Even then, all he did was laugh—a quick spurt of laughter. Ellen's face looking down at him—she'd stood up—changed. He watched it grow taut and wary. "Darling," she began, "if you don't feel up to it I'm sure they'll understand. Actually, John, it might be good for you to go out. Better than sitting and brood——"

He laughed again before she could finish the word. I don't want to laugh, he thought in surprise. I don't want to laugh! And he managed to stop. But the effort left him panting. He could hear his breathing loud in the room. It frightened him. She would speak again before he could catch hold of himself, and she must not speak again. He must reach her before she said anything else, anything worse. Surely he could reach her, show her, make her see and feel what he saw and felt. Surely he could communicate——

"Ellen," he said. Just that. "Ellen." It gave him another minute while she waited. Then he began carefully—he had tried so hard to be careful, he had tried so hard. "Ellen, don't you realize

—you must realize—that this isn't just something that a drink and a dinner can help? I can't go and sit with the Fairbanks and their guests and—talk about this. This is—I don't know. I haven't been able to think. It's the end. It's——”

“The end of what, John? The end of what, dear? It's not the end of your career, and you mustn't think——”

“My career! What do I care about my career, compared to——”

“I care.”

“You care? You do? Then why don't you care about what I'm feeling? My God, I thought if ever there was a man who would be mourned—— But you're thinking about my career. Why, I'd throw away my career without a thought—gladly, gladly, if it could have gained him a month, a week, three days——”

“Don't!” she said sharply.

He stared at her. “Don't what?”

“Don't talk that way. Extravagantly.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It's not extravagant. It's the truth. I feel that way.”

“You can't feel that way,” she said, almost in a whisper.

“But I do. Can't! My God, I thought—— I thought *you'd* feel this way too. Ellen—— I don't understand. You know—I thought you knew what I felt about him. I thought you felt the same.”

She had sat down again now, opposite him. She wasn't looking at him. Her hands were twisting together in her lap and she was looking at them.

“Ellen,” he said, “I thought at the least you'd understand what this means to me. All my life, ever since we came here—— I didn't have to stay. You know that. There were good offers. You didn't want me to take them. You wanted me to stay. And I stayed, and all my life was—was working for him and everything he meant. But they were the same. What he meant he was, and I worked for both. Don't you understand? Can't you see what it means to me? Why, he was like—he was like a father to me. I loved him, Ellen.”

“I hated him,” said Ellen. “I still do. I hate him.”

The room lay frozen around them. Then with a noise like

thunder it cracked across and John stared at her across the space between them.

"You might as well know," she said. "You might as well realize right now. For the first time in your life you might as well hear the truth. I'm tired of lying. I know what they mean by being sick and tired. I'm sick to my stomach with lying to you. I thought I could stand it when I came back. And I would have stood it, I guess. I would have managed if it hadn't been for this. Oh, tomorrow I'll be sorry, tomorrow I'll think I could have lied some more, but I'll be wrong. I'm glad, I'm glad, to tell you the truth. It has to be told. It needs telling.

"I hate him, and I hate you—part of you. The part that's been growing and growing, making me sicker and sicker, so sick that sometimes I've lain awake all night with disgust, thinking of things you've said and things you've done. Yes, disgust! That man—this place—they've eaten you up, between them. Eaten up everything that was alive and honest and decent, everything I respected. You're not a man any more. You're not a person; you're not even anything as individual as a hand or an ear or an eye. You're a piece of—of protoplasm, that's all, that can't live without other pieces to feed it and think for it, can't even move its muscles because its nerves belong to somebody else.

"I know I shouldn't say this to you. Nobody should say things like this. And we've been married twenty-four years. It isn't right to say these things. But I can't help it. They have to be said if you don't know them, if you can't see them. Nobody should do the things you've done to me, either.

"But I would have stood them all, I would have managed, if you hadn't done this to me tonight. Why, John, that man made you kill your son. Your only son. You sent him out to die for that man and never thought twice about it. When I begged you—begged you!—to do something to stop it, you were angry at me because it might hurt your career. Yes, you were. You said it was your job to tell people why their sons had to go, and so you couldn't do anything for your son. Did you ever think of giving up that job, or changing that job, so you could save your son? No. No, it never occurred to you. You wanted him to go. Don't try to lie to me, John. I wouldn't be telling you the truth like this if I

wanted to be lied to. I know you wanted him to go because it made you more secure in your job. If anybody asked, you had a son in the Army, a son overseas. And then you had a son dead. People sympathized.

"That man wrote you. You showed me the letter.

"And then tonight you tell me that you would have thrown away your career to give that man three days more to live. When you wouldn't even try to use it to save your son.

"Well, I'm glad he didn't have three more days to live. I'm glad he's dead. I wish he'd died before he killed Timmy, but he's dead now, just as dead as Timmy is, and I'm glad.

"But don't you ask me to mourn him, John Gregory, and don't tell me that you loved him like a father. If you loved him like a father, it's because you don't know what a father should be. Face it, John. You might as well face it. You're not a man—not a real grown-up man. You weren't a good father to Timmy because you were afraid to be, because you didn't know how to be. Because you want a father yourself. You were jealous of Timmy. Don't try to lie to me, John. You never loved him really.

"But you didn't have to kill him! It was that man made you do that! Made you kill my son."

How do you get rid of such words? Gregory, in his office alone in the dark, was engulfed by them. When one phrase, through repetition, slowly lost its killing edge, another welled forward to take its place. He could not stop them—he knew no ritual of exorcism, possessed no holy water to heal and purify. It had been possible to run away from the words themselves, from Ellen, white-faced and frozen on the love seat in the living room, pouring out this burst of hate and filth and horror. He had tried twice to stop her and then he had run away because if he had stayed he would have—become what she had become. Then anything might have happened, he thought bravely, for it was brave, it took real courage, for him to try to think at all. And yet he knew that this was not his real terror. It was not because he was afraid of striking her that he had come away. It was because he was afraid of being submerged. Ellen had let go of everything. She pulled out the black depths of her emotions and pelted him with what she found there. All he had ever known and recognized her by had disappeared.

That was why he had fled. Lest he, too, find himself and his personality ripped from his hands. He had lost so much. He could not afford to lose John Gregory. He had gathered John Gregory up and run with this precious prize to peace, to quiet, to darkness.

But there was no peace. The dark and the quiet were treacherous friends, letting too much in upon him. He was spun about, buffeted, caught in a whirlpool that would not let him be. He felt himself sucked down, deeper and deeper. He had always been afraid of falling. Now he was falling, but the vertigo and fear still clung to him; it was as if he were falling through a layer of fear and could expect no respite till he had fallen even lower, falling faster, faster, out of clogging terror into the keen shocking air of reality. He longed for the shock, for the pain, but he could not achieve it. They had taught him that vertigo was the price he paid for not falling, fear the price he paid for not dying. Now he was falling, now he was dying, but the price was still exacted, he could not fall free or die clean.

In desperation he jerked himself back into his body. I want a drink, he thought, I had better have a drink. Where's that bottle? He remembered seeing it in the lower drawer of his desk; he could see it there clearly. He'd always kept a bottle there until recently. Until he'd begun to drink too much. Then it had suddenly seemed embarrassing to him to have people know he had liquor right there in his desk, close to hand. He never drank during the day. He'd had it there for people who came in, for visiting firemen. But after—— But during the winter, he'd moved it. And now his mind was engaged in tricking him. Where had he put it?

He stood up in the dark, remembering a book he'd read recently about an alcoholic, remembering the scene where he'd hunted frantically for his bottle. He'd been appalled, reading it; it had seemed horrible and inhuman. Now it made him laugh a little with a real appreciation of comradeship. He wasn't alone. Other people knew this horror, lived in this filth. He wanted a drink, and he rummaged around in the dark looking for it, and feeling shame only as a reminder of the comforting warmth of common humanity.

The bottle was, quite reasonably, on a shelf in the closet next to an old hat. He took it down and opened it. His hands were very clever in the dark now. He was ready to drink when he

smelled the liquor, the sweet cheap whisky, and knew that if he drank he would lose hold on everything that still kept him together. In cold fear he put the bottle down. He didn't dare drink. If he drank, all the monstrosities about him would take one unimaginable step forward, ring him closer about, and prove beyond dispute that they were real and living. He could not drink and manage to hold them off.

So he did not drink. He sat in his office with the bottle open on the floor beside him and faced the terrors all night. He didn't dare sleep, either. He sat with his eyes open and fixed on the windows across from him, illuminated dimly by a lamp in the street below. The back of the chair on the other side of the desk was an anonymous dark outline against the window. It occurred to him once that it looked like a man huddled over the desk with his head on his arms. After that, he was convinced for a while that there really was another watcher sitting there with him, and he tried to breathe quietly so as not to give his presence away, and to sit without moving.

He was very, very tired. He thought once: I loved Timmy. I did love him. But just because I never told——

And then he thought once: It's easier for women. They don't have to be brave all the time. They're allowed to be cowards. Then he found himself trying to remember a time when Ellen had behaved like a coward, but he could not. He remembered the time when the bay mare had reared as she mounted, thrown her, and gone down on top. Ellen had lain there and said only, "Get this damn beast off my arm. She weighs too much." He remembered the time in the hospital when she'd looked up at him and said, "The baby's dead, isn't it?" and then, "Was it a girl?" "Another boy," he'd answered shakily. "Oh," she said, and then after a while, "I'm going to be sick as the devil, darling. Get the nurse." He remembered Ellen saying good-by to Timmy. She hadn't gone to the station. She'd lain on the couch in the living room reading the *New Yorker*, and when Timmy put his bag down in the hall and came over to her she just put the magazine down and held her face up for his kiss. "So long, keed," said Timmy. "So long," said Ellen. "Be a good boy, blow your nose on your hanky, and don't forget to say thank you." It was the formula she'd used when he was six and going to a party. Then

John had helped Tim into his coat and they'd gone off to the station. As the door was shutting behind them, John had glanced back. Ellen was still lying on the couch looking at the *New Yorker*. He didn't think anyone but himself would have known that her eyes were blind with tears she would not shed. And he remembered Ellen when her father was dying and would have no one else with him, not even Jim, who had tried to relieve Ellen again and again. But it had to be Ellen who sat hour after hour with her hand in old Mr. Talcott's, talking when he wanted to talk, quiet when he seemed to rest, hardly showing the strain until she was out of his room. No, he could not think of a time when he had seen Ellen behave like a coward.

And yet he could never believe that it was the same for her as it was for him. It *was* easier for her. Perhaps he had hit on the wrong reason. Perhaps it was not because she was a woman but because she was a Talcott that life seemed to be able to abuse her less. She had been bred to honor and courage as she had been bred to money and culture. She had never had to learn to compromise as he had learned to compromise, so that idealism became a valuable asset to a man merely because it raised the price at which he could be bought. Ellen was not buyable.

Which was easy enough for a Talcott. But all it proved, he told himself, was a rigidity of outlook, a lack of adaptability, an inability to get along with people. It wasn't fair to the rest of the poor miserable harried human race not to be buyable. It denied your common humanity. When we're all down in the gutter together, it's just plain funny for the Talcotts to pretend to be better than everyone else.

Yet Ellen was not buyable. Once she had given herself away. He supposed that what she had done tonight (or was it last night now?) had been to take herself back.

Oh Jesus, he thought inconclusively, oh sweet Jesus—and shut his eyes for a minute.

When he opened them the window had grown lighter, dawn had stolen into the room. His neck was stiff and sore, his shoulders ached. His chair behind his desk was only a chair. He watched the square of window, cutting the light geometrically, grow brighter and brighter. Color began to come alive in the room. The long night was past, it was another day.

He picked up the bottle, took a long drink, rolled over on the couch, buried his head in his arms, and began to cry. Every now and then he turned back far enough to reach the bottle and drink from it. But he hadn't had anything to eat for eighteen hours and he hadn't slept. The liquor reached him very quickly.

Rose hadn't slept much either. She'd fallen into a deep sleep only about half-past four, and it was barely two hours later when the alarm clock woke her. She'd lain and looked at the new day and decided that she would not get up. For once, she thought, John can get along without me. Then, this decision still clearly in her mind, she had found herself up, washing her face in the bathroom. The cold water did very little for her swollen eyes. Katie, the girl she roomed with, was still asleep. Rose let her sleep. She made herself a pot of coffee and drank it all before she started out.

All the way down in the streetcar she'd felt a queer sense of urgency. It's just because I went home in the middle of the afternoon, she thought, and don't know what's been going on. Pretty soon I'll get to feeling they can't run the government at all without me, and the men with the white coats will be out looking for me. But she did feel relieved when she reached the office and saw that she was the first of Gregory's staff in. She took the cover off her typewriter and dusted her desk.

Then she heard the noise in Gregory's office and got up and went in.

The opening door terrified Gregory. The bottle he was holding, still more than half full, slipped from his hand and rolled across the rug, spilling whisky all over. He reached for it clumsily, whimpering a little, before he looked up and saw Rose.

"John." She said his name very softly. Then she came in and sat down on a straight chair before she spoke again. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Foolish question Number 69," said Gregory. He couldn't see her very well. She seemed to grow closer and then fade away, and it made him feel sick. He had a right to feel sick if a person kept doing a thing like that to him. Then he suddenly felt very

sick indeed and put his feet on the floor to stand up and get into the bathroom. But his feet got tangled up queerly and then he *was* sick—sick all over the floor.

“Oh God!” said Rose, and turned her head away.

He looked up at her when he could. He could see her better now. Her eyes were closed in her white face, her lips were curled, and her throat moved with disgust. His first thought, looking at her, was surprise and anger that she had not tried to help him. Rose always helped him. But she didn't now. After a minute she got up abruptly, went to the window, and opened it. She stood there breathing in the morning air for a moment and then went into the bathroom. He heard the light switch click, the water run, and then she came out with some damp towels and began to clean up the mess he had made.

“You look disgusted,” he said thickly.

She didn't answer. He cleared his throat and said, “I am disgusting, aren't I?”

“Yes,” said Rose. She bundled the towels together and went back to the bathroom, threw them in, and closed the door.

“You'd better get out of here,” she said. “They'll be coming in soon. You'd better go home and sleep it off. Does Ellen know where you are?”

“That's my wife you're talking about,” said Gregory. “Don't talk that way about my wife. The bitch.”

Rose's breath came in sharply between her teeth and she started for the door.

“Wait,” said Gregory. She paused with her hand on the knob, her back toward him. “You don't understand,” he said. “Ellen—I can't go back there. She said things.”

Rose turned around and leaned against the door. She was positive that she and Ellen were friends, but she had been accused before, by suddenly jealous women, of misbehavior with their husbands, for whom she worked. She did not feel very young, but she knew she was young enough for a distraught wife to weave fantasies about. “What things?” she asked.

Gregory looked at her and for a moment honestly tried to tell her what things. He wanted to tell her. She would certainly sympathize. But he couldn't remember now what Ellen had said. He shook his head.

"Things about me?" asked Rose steadily.

"No," said Gregory. "Yes. I don't know. They were awful." His mouth twisted.

Rose went out and shut the door behind her. It seemed to her that she had spent hours in that horrible room smelling of liquor and vomit, but the hands of the clock had moved only a little, and the big room was still empty. She sat down at her desk and called Gregory's apartment.

Ellen answered.

"Hello," said Rose. "Ellen—John's down here and he's—not well."

"Where?" said Ellen. "Oh—Rose. Oh, thank you."

"I think he must have been here all night. If you were worried."

"No," said Ellen. "Oh, I don't mean that. Of course I was. What's the matter with him?"

"Drunk."

"Badly?"

"Pretty badly."

"What had I better do?"

"I think you'd better come down. Are you dressed?"

"No, but it won't take me three minutes. Damn, I wish we hadn't sold the car. I hate this cab business. I'll just have to bribe a driver and hope I give him enough to keep him quiet and not so much he'll talk about it. I'll be down as quick as I can. In half an hour if I have any luck."

"I'll leave the private door on the latch for you. Come in that way."

"Yes. And, Rose—thank you again."

"Don't mention it," said Rose, and hung up. She put her head down in her hands and sat this way for several minutes, thinking absolutely nothing. Her head ached dully above her left eye.

The outer door at the other end of the big room opened and one of the typists came in. "Hello," she said. "Oh, Miss Carmody, you look awful. Didn't you sleep? You knew the President, didn't you? Oh, isn't it terrible?"

"Hello," said Rose. "I'd met him. Everybody's late today." She got up to go back into the inner office while the typist was

opening her desk. She was suddenly afraid to leave him alone in there.

But he wasn't there at all.

She stood unbelieving for a moment while the door shut behind her, and then wasted a minute thinking he was in the bathroom. But no sound came out and she finally pushed the door open a crack and then remembered that she had shut it before, herself. She whirled around and looked in the closet. His hat was gone. And then she saw, laid very neatly in the center of his neat bare desk, his wallet, still thick with all his official identifications and credit cards. She picked it up and looked through it. Everything seemed to be there, except that he had taken whatever cash it held.

She put it back just where it had been and sat down to wait for Ellen. Twice she reached for the telephone to call the door-men and ask whether the Undersecretary had been seen going out, but each time she stopped herself before she could spy upon him like this. He'd been thoroughly sick and had probably sobered up fast and decided to—decided to—— She didn't know. But she felt wearily and for the first time in a long while that the situation was too much for her, and that she would do best to wait for Ellen and see what Ellen thought. If only he hadn't left the wallet she wouldn't have worried. But it seemed so odd to leave all his cards, all his proofs of identity, as if he were through with them forever. She shivered. The morning was chilly and she closed the window.

CHAPTER 4

To anyone watching, Gregory would have seemed to behave very sensibly. He smoothed his hair down, took his hat from the closet where he could not remember placing it (but it was there, where he always left it), and went out through his private entrance. He waited in the hall for the elevator, and when it arrived stood aside while it disgorged its load. A girl said "Good morning" to him and he replied. Then the elevator carried him down, he walked across the marble floor, across the bronze seal set in it, and out the heavy bronze doors. This is the last time I will ever do this, he thought, looking incuriously at the guard's heavy expressionless face as he passed him by. It was simply a recording of fact, with no emotion attached to it.

He walked around the corner to the bus stop, climbed into an empty bus waiting there, and sat down composedly. Except for the fact that he needed a shave, he looked no more ruffled and untidy than usual, no more ruffled and untidy than many earnest men in Washington who thought little about their appearance, whose wives and secretaries told them when to get their hair cut and sent them out to buy new suits. He didn't feel particularly tired. All he was aware of, riding away from the Department, was a curious need to look very carefully at all these places and streets that had been his life for so long. The little trees were in young green leaf, spring was here, but there was still a slight edge to the air. It made everything look very clear, very remote. The buildings had the air of being reproductions of themselves in some architectural elevation.

The bus pulled up at a corner in the business district and Gregory got out. Unhesitatingly he crossed the sidewalk and went into his bank. His passbook was the one thing he had kept of his possessions, as Rose had not yet noticed. He picked up a blank check

and went to one of the windows. The bank had just opened and was still almost empty. "I want to check my balance," he said.

The teller went off and returned in a few minutes with a mysterious sheet marked by the tracks and spoor of various business machines. "\$2176.53," he said.

Gregory gravely filled in the amount and gave him the check. "You're closing the account?" asked the teller in astonishment. "That's right."

The teller looked at him doubtfully and went away again. After a little while another man appeared, now on Gregory's side of the golden bars, and wearing a sack suit instead of the cotton jacket the teller wore.

"Mr. Gregory?" he said. "You—ah—wish to withdraw your entire account?"

Gregory turned and stared at him. The man backed away a little. "Yes," said Gregory. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"No, no, of course not. Naturally we'd—ah—wish to be sure no checks were outstanding which had not yet cleared——"

Gregory reached in his pocket. "Here," he said contemptuously. "Here's a new checkbook you issued me on the third of the month. I haven't written any checks in it, as you can see. That's ten days."

"But of course—ah—blank checks could be used. Out-of-town checks might not yet—ah—have come through——"

"Are you refusing to honor this check?" asked Gregory in a tone of controlled savagery.

"Oh no, no, certainly not. Merely——"

"Then give me the money." And he turned his back on the suffering bank official. The teller looked at the assistant vice-president; the assistant vice-president consulted with his soul and finally nodded. John Gregory received \$2176.53 and walked out of the bank.

The money made a wad in his breast pocket. He had nothing to carry it in but a brown envelope the bank had given him. It was inconvenient. I'll have to manage better than this, he thought, and just then a leather-goods store caught his eye. He went in and bought a money belt. He had enough cash in his trousers pocket to pay for it without displaying the envelope and its con-

tents. He came out of the store and walked purposefully toward the railroad station. There he went into the washroom and behind a locked door stowed most of the money away and put the belt on.

He came out feeling secure and competent. There was no time for him to feel anything else, for before he could wonder what he was going to do next, his feet had taken him across to a ticket window. Half a dozen people were ahead of him, but he stood in line with a patience that was completely foreign to him. Ordinarily, of course, he would not have been there at all. Rose would have arranged for a ticket, a Department messenger would have picked it up, and it would have appeared on Gregory's desk at the right moment as though by miraculous intervention. Now he waited twenty minutes before he was next but one to the window, without shifting his weight from foot to foot, without glancing at the clock, without any sense of something behind him pushing him on.

The man directly ahead of him was a porter from one of the hotels. He had a list of various tickets to be picked up to destinations scattered about the country like a geography quiz—several to New York and Chicago, of course, but others to Albuquerque, Dallas, Jacksonville, Kansas City, Boston, and Spokane. Gregory listened attentively to the details of the transaction. It was just what his mind was ready to find interesting—something impersonal and involving arrangements that were unfamiliar. He was almost sorry when the porter took his sheaf of tickets and Pullman reservations and left.

"Where to?" said the agent.

"Key West," said Gregory without any hesitation at all. Once a long time ago he and Ellen had intended to go there and had not gone.

"No train service to Key West," said the agent. "You take a bus from Miami."

"All right, Miami."

"Coach or Pullman?"

"When can I get a berth?"

"You can't. We're sold out as far ahead as we can reserve."

Gregory looked at him. He didn't feel particularly annoyed by the silly question, but the agent flushed angrily anyway.

"All right, all right," he said, "I just asked. You could have had space, or something. You want a coach seat?"

"With a coach seat, I can get right on the next train, is that right?"

"You can try."

"When is the next train?"

"Eleven thirty-one."

"I'll have a coach seat."

"\$28.46."

Gregory paid him, took his ticket, and walked away. An hour and a half till the train left. Well, an hour till he should line up beside the gate for his seat. With the same calm certainty that had brought him out of his office to the bank and away from there to the station, he went into one of the grimy little restaurants, sat down and ordered coffee.

The counterman slid the coffee up to him and asked, "Anything else?"

"What's that stuff?" said Gregory.

"This? Danish pastry." His voice accepted Gregory's ignorance as simply another example of the insanity of the world.

"I'll have that." He ate it, ordered more coffee, bought a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and sauntered out.

"The eleven thirty-one for Miami?" he asked a porter, stopping at the edge of a crowd.

"Yes sir. Right here, sir."

"Here?"

"Yes sir."

An hour before the train's departure a pack of people had already gathered about the gate. Women with children (the mother sitting on a suitcase, the child leaning against her knee), Negroes waiting alone and impassive, sailors waiting in groups and uproarious, a boy in a corporal's stripes, looking about sixteen, holding a girl's hand, not a word passing between them—people, people, people, waiting to go somewhere—all America was waiting beside the gate. For one appalled moment Gregory saw himself unable to get on the train, left behind in Washington, in the trap. Sweat broke out all over him and he plunged forward toward the gate into the heart of the crowd. His foot struck a suitcase; he stumbled and fell against a khaki shoulder.

"What the hell're you doin', buddy?" said the soldier, and kept him from falling.

"Sorry," Gregory muttered, and tried to shove by.

"Wait a minute there. Where the hell you think you're goin' to? We're all goin' the same place. Quit shovin', now."

Lapped by the crowd, Gregory came to a halt, breathing hard. He was tall enough to see over the heads before him to the gate. There seemed an infinite number to him; they made him dizzy. He would never get on the train. Desperately, little by little, he wriggled away from the soldier, around two fat middle-aged women in respectable black, and began trying to slip up through the crowd closer to the gate.

Having no baggage to hinder him, he did better at fulfilling this universal striving than most of the rest of the crowd, and he was appreciably nearer the front when the gates rattled back and the packed mass of people began to pulse through—first a burst as those in front ran, and then an irregular struggle as the second rank fought past each other to be next. Gregory found himself caught in one of these periodic melees that eddied before the gates, felt his coat almost torn from his shoulders, thought his right shoe would never free itself from the clutch of a straw basket and a duffel bag, and finally was through the gates and running down the platform. He looked up at the windows as he ran. First came a couple of coaches, seats already filled, the faces of the occupants gazing down coldly upon the runners on the platform who must still compete for what the lucky ones had already won. Then, illogically, a string of Pullmans, each with its porter and his little stool, and still empty, for those who could be serenely confident of their accommodations and would never get caught in this wild mob fighting for coach seats. Then the diner. Then another string of coaches, and this time clots of people about the steps, struggling up. Gregory ran past the first three cars, saw the next only beginning to fill up, and halted panting behind three sailors and a blonde girl. The blonde went up squealing, the sailors stampeded after. Gregory was in and then, halfway down the car, the possessor of a window seat. He dropped into it, shaking with sudden reaction, took one hunted look around, and huddled into himself—his hat pulled down, his chin on his fist, and his elbow on the window sill. He

sat and tried to see nothing, withdrawing and withdrawing as the train filled around him, only a furtive glance flickering out every now and then.

A woman sat down beside him. He took it in with a small shock. His left eye examined, repeated, the print of her dress, grew so familiar with it that it seemed at last the stuff of his dreams. The aisle began to fill, first with transients pushing hopefully forward, finally with those who had given up all thought of a seat, who were going to stand, or perch on a suitcase, and hope for a chance at the seat of someone getting off the train in Richmond or Petersburg or at least one of the Carolina towns. People still ran past on the platform. Finally they, too, stopped and the waiting became just that, nothing but waiting. After what seemed hours, Gregory stole a look at his watch. Eleven-fifteen. He looked again. Eleven-nineteen. Then he could not look away. The second hand ticked busily around. Eleven twenty-three. Eleven twenty-five. Eleven twenty-eight. Eleven thirty-two. The train gave a lurch and started. The platform slid slowly past, was succeeded by the yards. They were on their way. The jaws of the trap had not closed, but he felt as if they had been kept open only by his will, by his frantic necessity to escape. Exhausted, beaten, he fell deeply asleep.

When he woke, the train was roaring through the afternoon. He must have slept for hours. He came awake very slowly, licking his lips, his mouth sour. Sunlight, too bright and too hot, was pouring in on him. He opened one eye and closed it quickly, almost blinded by the dazzle of the afternoon. Then he sat up, turned his back to the window, and blinked at his companion travelers.

They were still standing in the aisle in a kind of drugged patience. Next to him, the woman in the print dress was reading a magazine on astrology, whispering the words half aloud to herself, as if she were repeating glad tidings to all men. She was fat, swarthy, and sweating a bit. Gregory smelled her very distinctly. He stood up abruptly, and she looked up at him in surprise. He looked firmly over her head, for he was terrified that she would speak to him, penetrate his withdrawal, and involve him once and for all in the real world; in the space-time continuum through which this packed mass of humanity rode south, swaying, sweat-

ing, biding its time, used to discomfort, indifferent to smells. Gregory stood there, unable to move out into the aisle for a minute as the train threw itself around a curve, and clung desperately to his aloneness and apartness from the hundred or so human beings in the car.

He started out to the aisle past the knees of the woman in the print dress.

"You getting off, mister?" a young soldier in the aisle asked him.

Gregory glared at him, ready to snarl: "Mind your own business!"

But the woman said, "Sit down while he's gone, anyway." And then to Gregory, "How far are you going?"

"I'm going all the way through," said Gregory. "Sorry." Suddenly he *was* sorry, enormously sorry. This boy was an American soldier, he reminded himself, clutching at one of the clichés of wartime Washington, ready to die for his country; and the best his country could give him in return was a chance to stand up in a train! Gregory felt self-righteous about it, and irritated. "Listen," he heard himself saying, "have you had any lunch? Come on into the diner, let me buy you something. Have a drink. At least you can sit for a while." He smiled down at the woman. "Will you keep my seat?"

"Sure," she said. "They know it's yours, anyway." She nodded at the people in the aisle. "He's going into the diner," she told them. "Which of you kids wants to sit while he's gone?"

Gregory got himself out past the woman's knees, and he and the soldier plunged erratically back toward the diner. But of course, though unexpectedly to Gregory, there was a line of twenty people waiting ahead of them even though it was the middle of the afternoon. They stood, their muscles loose, and let themselves jolt and sway with the jolting of the train, uncomfortable and inured to discomfort. The conductor pushed past them while they stood there; his clipper snapped at the magic bits of paper that assured their passage to their destinations. All the time, as they inched slowly forward, the line lengthened behind them. Finally they reached the door to the vestibule. As Gregory pulled it open, he smelled himself, quite as distinctly as he had smelled his seat companion. That barrier dropped from him—there was

nothing to set him off, in that particular way, from any of the people packed in the cars behind them. And yet, after the first moment of horror, he felt quite unconcerned, even quite happy and content. He stank, they all stank. He hadn't shaved, he was hungry and his belly rumbled quite audibly, and he didn't care.

After a little while the steward gave them places at a table for four across from the blonde girl Gregory had seen getting on the train and a burly, grizzled Seabee. There was no choice of food beyond eggs, chicken, or fish. Gregory and the soldier thankfully ate chicken and wiped the greasy gravy off their plates with swabs of bread. Gregory paid the check, they sat long enough to smoke a cigarette, and then the steward asked them to go along, there were other people waiting. They plunged back toward their places with the grotesque slowness and unreasonable expenditure of effort of a dream. The train slowed down, pulled into a station, and stopped as they came through the car before their own, and there the young soldier left Gregory as a seat was vacated.

"Thanks," he said, sliding into the seat, "I'll be seeing you. My grip's back there, where you are. Keep an eye on it, will you? Thanks again."

Gregory was pushed past him by the slow ooze of people getting off the train, and at last found himself back at his seat. A very young sailor was in it, sleeping innocently. Gregory stood in the aisle for an hour until another station was reached, and the boy awoke. He was glad to sit down again and as dusk fell he bought a cheese sandwich and a bottle of milk that tasted like chalk from a boy who pushed his way through the train, shouting his wares. This was his dinner. He didn't see the soldier he'd given lunch to, and presumed him settled in the car behind. He didn't want to see him again; he didn't want to have to talk to anyone—even to listen, as he had listened, to the boy's endless talk about the camp where he was training, about the obvious unfairness with which he had been treated and the clever way in which he planned to outmaneuver the prejudiced men working against him. Gregory wanted no more contact with anyone, although the past contact, the fact of the boy's companionship, was somehow a comfort to him. I must be all right, he thought vaguely, staring into the dark window beside him. I got along with him all right, I did him a good turn.

But after the assurance, his mind would retreat even from the memory of reality; he could feel himself dwindle and dwindle until there was nothing left inside his head but a pin point of perception, just able to watch the window. The glass reflected the interior of the car. It had become a dim mirror turning light back on itself, instead of an opening on the world. Only once in a while could Gregory see anything through it, and that was when queer little fires burning beside the track appeared, smoldered and smoked as the train rushed by, and vanished over his shoulder. Long, low, little fires like the ones that lick up through the pavements of hell, where the torturing irons are heated. After a long time the conductor dimmed the lights overhead, people settled themselves to sleep. Most of the ones standing had found seats; only one or two figures drooped upright in the dimness, and finally these sat down in the aisle, stretched out with their heads on their possessions, and slept too.

It was beginning to be dawn when Gregory awoke fully from his doze and discovered that two thousand dollars which he was sure should be in his breast pocket were not there. He lay back in his seat frozen with the thought, as if by not moving, by approximating the posture of sleep, he could put off the moment when he must accept this awful fact. But it could not be denied. He remembered clearly the envelope the bank teller had given him, crackling with new bills. He remembered stowing it away in his pocket and telling himself that he must be very careful of it. And after that he could remember nothing else touching the money. The cold sweat of terror broke out all over him; the hairs on his head prickled with panic. Now he was truly alone. Now the last, the important, the really distinctive barrier between himself and the people sleeping around him had gone—the barrier of money. He was naked in the terrible world, with no bribes to offer it, no ransom he could pay. He shut his eyes, his mouth fell open, he groaned and snorted in horror. The woman beside him woke, shook his shoulder, and said in a grumpy undertone, "Wake up, wake up, you're having a nightmare."

But it wasn't a nightmare, it was true. Forced to be quiet, he could escape from the abyss of terror within him only by hastily trying to build a fence around it with his reason. It was the boy, he thought, it must have been the boy who took it. While he and

the young soldier had stood together in the crowd waiting to get into the diner, the boy had robbed him, neatly, secretly, with no qualms, and then gone in with his victim and been treated by him to lunch. Robbed, tricked, humiliated—he set his lips against a groan.

It occurred to him once, it just barely flickered across his consciousness, that something was wrong with this re-creation of his loss. Surely he would have noticed, when he paid for lunch, that his money was missing? But he dismissed the suggestion angrily. His conviction of betrayal was so strong, he was so positive that he could have helped no one but Judas, that this mere rational remembrance of fact was overridden. Of course it was the boy he had pitied and fed who had robbed him. Who else could it be?

This certainty held until full daylight came into the car, until the sleepers around him groaned awake. The sparse forests of northern Florida were running past the track now and the conductor put his head in and shouted "Jacksonville!" Past him in the door came the young soldier, down the aisle to Gregory's seat. He's come to give it back, he's repented, Gregory thought, and waited, the forgiving words of absolution ready on his lips. But no, the boy merely reached up and pulled a shabby bag down from the luggage rack. He glanced down at Gregory, nodded, and said, "So long, and thanks a lot," and turned to go up the aisle.

It was the irony and the audacity of that "Thank you" that brought Gregory to his feet, his mouth open to shout "Stop, thief!" The woman beside him sat up and stared amazedly at him; the boy turned in one breath-taking spasm of muscles, ready to kill as he had been trained. All about him, it seemed to Gregory, people shrank back from him, receding into positions of observation. He felt eyes on him from everywhere.

And he felt, too, the money belt about his hips and knew where his two thousand dollars were.

He stood stunned with the realization of what he had almost done, of how he had tricked himself. He stared blankly at the boy as the train slowed down, coming into the station. The boy stared back in real bewilderment, and then looked questioningly at the woman next to Gregory.

"He's all right," she said, nodding at the boy, at the other watchers. "He just ain't awake yet. He was having a nightmare, bad dreams, you know how it is. The kid just come for his bag," she went on to Gregory. "That's all. You must-a been dozing and half seen him leaning over, and it give you a fright. My first husband, he'd been torpedoed in the other war, he'd get to thinking he was in the water again sometimes and it was awful. He was much worse than you. He'd thresh around, shouting and yelling till I could get him awake. He give me a black eye once." She laughed reminiscently at the thought. Gregory sat down and put his head in his hands. "See," she said, "he's all right now. Go along, kid, this is your stop. So long. Don't worry, I'll take care of him." And the boy went down the aisle and through the door.

"I'm sorry," Gregory said into his hands. He was shaking with reaction at what he had almost done. I must have wanted to try to hold onto the boy, he thought, to try to get some grip on him, put him under some obligation to me. If he'd really robbed me, I would have had the right to ask him for something in return. But what? He wasn't even a very nice boy. I didn't like him. Why should I have wanted to get hold of him?

And there his mind failed him. He could see the difficult thing, understand clearly what he had been up to by this hallucination of robbery. But he could not get back at all to the simple thing. It never occurred to him that a boy in uniform, the same age as Timmy, must have answered the deep craving within him for his son, the blind refusal to admit him dead, the aching need to resurrect him. He had buried these emotions so deep, with the thought of his son, that he did not even know they existed. He wondered and pondered and was frightened at what he had found within himself, at the complete conviction with which he had known that his money was gone, but he never thought of Timmy.

The woman beside him made him buy a container of coffee and some dry cookies for breakfast, and this nourished him until the train came at last into Miami in the afternoon. The journey was over, but the fact did not really seem to apply to him personally as he stood up and pushed with all the other people in the car toward the door. He was stiff, tired, and sore, dirty, hungry, and unshaven. I must get a place to clean up, he thought, yawning, as he reached the door.

And there he stopped. Panic awoke again. He could not go down the steps to the ground. The train had been a refuge. Once it had started, he was safe until he reached the end of the journey, he was lost in the mob of which he had become a part, no one could reach him. But now—now he had to return to earth. The flight was over. The great steel wheels of the train would no longer isolate him, insulate him, from the common earth touched by the feet of all humanity.

He hung at the top of the steps, his eyes opened too wide to see anything clearly but his thoughts. Why, someone might be waiting for him! Someone might have come to take him back! But that was not his real terror; his real terror was that no one would be waiting for him. For if there was no one—if there was no one—what would he do? Where would he go? There would be no one to tell him anything; he would have to find out all alone how one lived in this town, how one lived anywhere, and he did not know how to begin. Oh, worse than the trap waiting to close would be the knowledge that there was no trap, that he had indeed escaped, and was condemned to be free.

“Come on, buddy, don’t block the gangway.”

“Whatsa matter?”

“Hurry up there!”

The voices behind him pushed him down the steps until he stood alone in the beating sunlight of Florida. He moved to one side and waited, his back against the train and his eyes shut. If someone came up, if a hand fell on his shoulder, if they were there to take him back, they could find him here. He would make no trouble. His desire for freedom had been just sufficient to set him this far on the road. He had made the break; he had courageously taken his savings (it was easy enough to save when Ellen’s money paid for everything except rent and food); he had valiantly bought himself a ticket on a train, fought his way on, and by superior skill and cunning got himself a seat; he had triumphed over the torture of a day-long coach trip—so far his urge to escape could carry him. But now it was more difficult. There was no next step to be taken before he began to do the simple things. He had run for his life. Now he would have to live. After a while it became evident that no one was going to come after him. He opened his eyes and walked slowly up the platform.

That was Miami. He went on to Key West the next day, after a night passed in the station waiting room. He'd gone out, got a shave and a hot meal, but nothing could hide the fact that he'd slept in his clothes for two nights, and even though the Florida season was ending, no hotel that he could imagine staying in would have him. He did go into one place which apparently did not mind his appearance, or his lack of luggage, but before he paid the eight dollars in advance that they wanted for a room, the smell of the place was too much for him and he went out again.

He was glad to get on the bus in the morning. And yet continuation of the flight was not the same as the flight itself. The night had made a hiatus. He was not quite the same stunned vagrant who had fled the jaws of the trap two days before, exile and refugee. He was quieter now and more cautious; and he was beginning, just a little, to approximate a type—the man alone, moving on. Places were beginning to make a little sense. He was aware now that Key West was beyond Miami and that he must travel a certain number of hours to get there.

He got there, and once there, he stayed. The only room he could find was an airless back bedroom over an Italian restaurant, and he found that by passing out in the restaurant below it. He had eighteen dollars in his pocket, and instead of taking it and throwing him out in the street, the proprietress merely took it and called it a week's room rent. How she knew he had more money and would be a good investment no one knew, unless it was because his hands were soft and his nails unbroken.

Awaking the next morning in the strange room, he saw her sitting and watching him. His hand, which had been going to his belt to make sure it still carried its secret hoard of bills, changed its objective instinctively and scratched his belly. His eyes watched her with ineffective cunning under half-closed lids.

"Good morning," she said politely. "You are awake."

He was forced to agree, and they settled the question of the room then and there. "Eighteen dollars each week, it is cheap, cheap!" she said. "But I am sympathetic, I am friend of the poor. I could rent this room for twice, three times, to girl with friends. But then is trouble. Who knows when the Shore Patrol comes, declares Pizzeria off bounds? Then I am ruined. So, for this little

money, sir, I am glad to let you stay. There are no other rooms in Key West. Perhaps you know this?"

He didn't know it, but he confirmed it as fact within two days. He had gone out into the beating sunlight of the afternoon to explore. Mrs. Grandi was in the restaurant, sitting in the corner by the window, behind the snake palm, watching the street. She was doing nothing—sitting behind a table with a clean starched tablecloth on it, doing nothing very powerfully. She did not need to have a piece of work in her hands to occupy herself. Her will and her intention were enough to fill her mind and use her strength. He was afraid, looking at her, and would have gone back upstairs to the ruffled bed and untidy room if he could have done so without having been observed. But she had seen him, had seen that he was going out.

"Good afternoon," he said, reaching the foot of the stairs.

She inclined her head grandly, without speaking, and he walked quickly through the area of her gaze, opened the door, and went out. Behind him he heard her voice upraised in command, and was for the moment persuaded that she had called to someone to follow him. Someone or something? His skin crept between his shoulders, and the crashing Italian syllables echoed in his ears. Later he discovered, through hearing the same order repeated, that she had simply shouted for beer.

He walked, sweating, along the broken pavement of the streets of Key West. When he came to a drugstore he went in and drank coffee thirstily. It did not help. The streets outside, the smells of the sea, of garbage, and of mud covered with mangrove swamps were as unfamiliar as ever. Indeed, the coffee simply helped him to recognize their strangeness more acutely. There was nothing familiar, nothing at all. His very skin was aware of strangeness—the warmth, the sun, the summer light. He was deeply uneasy.

Even so, he left the drugstore reluctantly. Any place where he happened to be became transiently a place he hated to leave. But a sign across the street, "Rooms," caught his eye. He went over and inquired, but there were no vacancies. It was so all up and down the streets. Toward sunset he came out on a drive along the water. He waited there and watched the sun go down, until the last light faded. Then he hurried back to the Pizzeria, terrified and guilty. That night he was sober going to bed. Later,

lying awake in the dark, he heard someone try his door. He had locked it, but he was not too surprised to see it open, a crack at first, and then a little wider, wide enough for a face to look in. He could not tell who it was—a man though, not Mrs. Grandi. He lay in bed shaking with terror, trying to make no sound. But whoever it was had heard his breathing change, stop, and go on, and the face withdrew, the door shut very gently, and the key turned in the lock. Footsteps went softly down the hall. Gregory—he had told them his name was Peter Graham—lay awake in the dark for the rest of the night, but no one came to the door again.

The next day he went to a savings bank and put his money there. He had almost two thousand dollars left. At the last minute, he held two hundred dollars back. Then, when he had made his deposit, he went across the street to the post office, rented a box in the name of David Hale, and mailed the money and the bankbook to the box number. He spent the rest of the day on the wharves by the fishing boats, got drunk happily at dinner, and went soundly to sleep with his door unlocked.

This arrangement worked well for three weeks. Gregory managed to establish a kind of *entente* with Mrs. Grandi—suspicious, but still *cordiale* enough. She was, he decided, merely silent, not sinister, and they bowed gravely and exchanged greetings on passing each other in the hall or on the stairs. Indeed twice, on days of sudden pouring rain, Gregory sat in the restaurant with her, drinking coffee and copying out menus. It was really cozy. He enjoyed watching his handwriting flow smoothly across the paper, and he was very accurate at his copying. He wrote a handsome hand, one he had always been proud of. Now, to see it was like finding an old friend in a strange place. This was the only thing recognizable that he brought out of his past. Actually, it was the only thing he had ever possessed in his life for a space of thirty years.

On good days, Gregory walked about town. He found a place to swim, and would lie out on the beach for hours at a time. He had bought himself some bright shoddy shirts, slacks, a visored cap, and dark glasses, and he went about armored in these strange clothes against even the fear of recognition. Who was going to see him, anyway? But it was not for the others, people who had known

him somewhere and might remember him, that he wore his disguise. It was for himself. And successfully, for he certainly did not find John Gregory looking out at him when he looked in the mirror. The trouble was that he found no one else. There were times when he forgot the name he had given himself, times when he lay half naked on the sand in the sun and could hardly feel his body clothing him at all. There was almost no one in the mirror, there was the frailest garment of flesh lying on the beach, there was nothing but a recurrent breath whispering in the dark at night, and if he did not remember to take that breath, to look for his reflection in the glass—— He shuddered, put on the cap and the dark glasses, and went out.

In the post office one day he did a queer thing. He had gone over to the bank to withdraw forty dollars, and had come back to mail the bankbook and the two one-hundred-dollar bills he kept with it to his post office box. Now it was time for him to leave and stroll absently in the direction of the beach. But something was worrying him, there was something he ought to do. He tried to go out, but instead he found himself buying a stamped envelope and a sheet of paper. He walked stiffly to the desk, took the scratchy pen, and wrote, "My dear Rose." He stared at this for a while, then sealed it and addressed it hastily, and went out of the post office. He walked more swiftly than usual and today he stopped and had lunch at a sea food restaurant he'd passed several times and tried to go into, unsuccessfully, before. He felt pretty good and did not notice the man following him.

The forty dollars paid his room rent and left him enough to eat on for almost a week, so it was some time before he went back to the bank. He simply readdressed a fresh envelope to himself every day in the post office and confided bankbook and money to the mails. Then one day he found he had only two dollars on him. That day he mailed the two hundred dollars separately, put the bankbook in his pocket, and went across the street to the bank.

It was closed.

He stood staring at the door. The glass gave him back a dim picture of himself, shadowy and insubstantial. He tried the door again, desperately, persuaded that the faint figure he saw had merely been too weak to press the latch far enough down before.

Surely by taking thought, by an exercise of will, he could get the door open. He shook it angrily.

Someone came up behind him and said, "The bank is closed today."

Gregory turned. The man who had spoken to him—a young brown-faced man with a scar across his left cheek—looked familiar. Uncertain whether he was an inhabitant of the waking world or of his dreams, Gregory studied his face with the slight power of concentration at his command and said finally (and after all, safely), "I've seen you."

"Of course." The young man laughed. "I'm Rico—Rico Rossielli, Mrs. Grandi's nephew. You've seen me at the Pizzeria."

"Yes." Having disposed of this, Gregory turned back to the bank door. It was not possible that it should be locked.

Rico said again, "The bank is closed, Mr. Graham. It's the war, you know."

"Oh. Oh yes, of course," said Gregory vaguely. "The war."

Rico spoke gently in explanation. "It is over." He stole a swift look at Gregory under his long silky lashes. Gregory said nothing at all and his face did not change. "Yes," Rico went on cheerfully, "the war is over. In Europe, that is, the war against the Germans. Now perhaps we poor Italians will have a little peace and a little food—at least until the Communists come." He took Gregory's arm and walked down the street beside him. "It is a day of rejoicing, Mr. Graham, and the bank is closed so that everyone may rejoice. Shouldn't we rejoice too, you and I?"

"I haven't any money," Gregory said. "I was going——" He stopped, feeling irritated. Now why did I tell him where my money was? he thought, with a far-off approximation of anger.

Rico shrugged and laughed. "Is it necessary for rejoicing to have money? Well—perhaps. But I have a little money, and on such a day surely we should not quarrel about who provides the material we make use of for our celebration. Here. Let's have some wine." He led Gregory around a corner, down a narrow street, and through a door into a small restaurant, a poor relation to the flourishing Pizzeria. There was a sour smell in the hallway behind the window with the decorated frosted glass. Gregory walked through it with Rico's hand holding his arm, and into the room beyond.

Half a dozen people were there, clustered about a blaring radio. Rico shouted at them, and they got up and greeted him with embraces and exclamations. He explained Gregory in a phrase or two of Italian, gesturing at him and then yelling, "Mr. Graham, Mr. Graham." Gregory nodded politely. He felt a little dizzy. The room was terribly hot and there was a powerful smell of cooking, of olive oil and garlic. He sat down on a cane-seated chair.

The radio was the only thing speaking English in the room, and the almost confidential effect of this lured Gregory into listening to it. It was thus that he really received word of the end of the European war. When Rico had told him, it had seemed merely an explanation of the queer behavior of the bank door, with no further significance. "—instrument of peace to be signed at General Eisenhower's headquarters," said the voice of a man Gregory knew quite well, a commentator he'd seen a good deal of when the man had been stationed in Washington. "Yesterday Count von Krosigk, Germany's Foreign Minister, announced the unconditional surrender to the Allies——"

The war is over, said Gregory's brain. The war is over! My God, I've got to get to work! What am I doing here? The war is over! Oh, Ellen, Ellen!

He started to get up—there would be so much waiting at the office to be done! But before he reached his feet, his mind slid away with a long slow sickening lurch, not so much of realization as of deliberate refusal to realize anything. A refusal to find this place queer. A refusal to remember any need, any urgency, any reason for joy at this news.

A hand came over his shoulder and put a glass of red wine on the soiled tablecloth before him. The voice on the radio had changed to the blare of a brass band, to which Rico's friends were listening politely. Gregory picked up the wine and drank it.

They stayed at the restaurant for a while, and then Rico became bored and they went out into the hot streets again. Two of Rico's friends—or they may have been cousins—came too. The cousins brought several bottles of chianti in their little straw slings, and they became quite gay, reeling about the streets and singing, kissing girls and offering them drinks of wine. Then one of the

cousins got into a fight with a drunken sailor. The sailor was quite drunk and the cousin was having very little trouble when they heard whistles being blown at the end of the narrow alley they were in. The Shore Patrol was coming up at a run, three huskies with their sticks out, their feet heavy on the cobblestones. Rico and the cousin who was not fighting grabbed Gregory's arms and they all ran in the other direction, hard.

"Will your cousin be all right?" Gregory asked when they stopped to pant, leaning against the wall of a small yellow clap-board building.

Rico shrugged.

After a while they went on together. Things began to get mixed up for Gregory now. He knew at one time that he was in a barbershop. Rico was in the chair next to him, and someone at whom Rico was shouting and laughing was shaving Gregory. Then they were sitting about an enormous round table in the dark middle room of a strange house, eating a huge Italian meal. Gregory was feeling extraordinarily grateful to Rico. What kind of a day would he have had without him? He would have had no wine, no pasta, no companionship; he would not even have known that this was the holiday finally established by the death of twenty million people in a war that no one was able to name, the war that was known only by its place in a numerical series. He ate a great deal, not tasting anything very much, and then felt suddenly sickish. He put his fork down, but before he had said anything, Rico was up, coming round the table to him, knowing what was wrong.

"You want to lie down," Rico said, and took him out of the hot room and up the narrow stairs. They went into a bedroom where the late afternoon sun was still blatant. Gregory moved unsteadily to the bed and sat down.

"Lie back," said Rico. Gregory did. His stomach lurched, his head spun, the pillow under his head smelled evil, but none of it mattered. He could feel Rico untying his shoes and taking them off, and mouthed something that he meant for thanks. Then Rico's hands were light and deft about his body, settling him on the bed. And then nothing. For a long time, nothing. Only the body snoring and sweating on the bed, alone in the room except when Rico came in every once in a while to look at him thought-

fully. But Rico went away before morning. Gregory still slept on. Whoever usually occupied that bed made no call for it that night.

When he awakened the next morning, it was almost more than he could bear. He lay still with his eyes shut, remembering oblivion. But it was no use. He could not go back there. I am alive, he thought, oh terrible, terrible, terrible! He opened his eyes.

Immediately he felt desperately ill. His heart shook and pounded in his breast and his head was full of a sullen aching varied by sudden shoots of pain that wanted to crack it open. His watch, when he finally focused his eyes on it, said four-thirty, but the crystal was cracked across, and it had stopped. The raw light from the street made it difficult to keep his eyes open. For a while he thought he could not get up, and then he thought that he would die if he did not have a drink of water. When he put his feet down the room seemed to swing away from him, and even though he waited after fumbling his shoelaces into knots, getting to the door was like walking up a steep hill.

In the hall he paused. Everything was quiet. A cat came toward him from the head of the stairs and twined around his ankles, asking for food. He almost tripped over it, and the cat slid away, flicking its tail reproachfully. He found the bathroom by the smell. No one had flushed the toilet during the night, though at least one person had used it. He flushed it, looking away and not breathing, and then managed to get a window open. He leaned out, breathing in the air for a minute, and then ran the cold water. It never got very cold, but it cooled his skin as it dried on it, and it cooled his throat.

It made him uneasy, coming out into the hall, that he did not know what time it was. Much more uneasy than being alone in a strange place. He started downstairs, hoping to find a clock in the kitchen. There was none, but the cat rejoined him, winding itself about his feet in an ecstasy of desire. Gregory opened the icebox. The cat reared up, purring. There was a dish of chicken livers and giblets near the front, and Gregory took it out and gave it to the cat. The cat went to work on it with bloody enthusiasm. Gregory slammed the icebox door.

Over his head someone shifted in bed, the floor creaked, and a voice called out, "Who's there?"

Gregory stood still, seized with horror. He wanted to call back,

but he did not know what words to call. He had forgotten the name he had been using.

"Who's there?" the voice shouted again, and there was a thump on the floor as someone got out of bed. In blind terror Gregory ran through the dining room and parlor and out the front door. He let it slam behind him, ran down the block, and halted only after he had rounded a corner. His heart was shaking his body to bits, his chest was racked with panting. After a while he walked on slowly, halting every now and then to rest. When he had been walking for some time, he began to know where he was. The streets were beginning to fill up, and he heard a clock strike nine. A terrible fatigue was coming over him now and he was very thirsty again. He thought he would never reach the Pizzeria.

Mrs. Grandi was sitting in the window behind the snake palm when he came in. He inclined his aching head and said, "Good morning."

Mrs. Grandi said, "We do not serve meals until twelve o'clock."

"That's all right," said Gregory. His tongue felt too big for his mouth. "I'll just have a drink of water and go to sleep. Did Rico get home all right?"

Mrs. Grandi said, "Rico? Go to sleep? What is it that you are talking about? This is a restaurant. One does not sleep here. What is your name?"

"Greg—Graham," said Gregory. "Peter Graham." He said it automatically. He did not expect it to change the steady, determined lack of recognition on Mrs. Grandi's face. Her black eyes were very calm. Nothing would make them recognize him. But in spite of this knowledge, he heard himself going on, too loudly, "I've rented a room here! What is all this? You know me! Where's Rico? Rico!" Mrs. Grandi sat still and continued to watch him, and he knew very well that she was having the best of the encounter and that he was already hopelessly defeated.

"Who is Rico?" Mrs. Grandi finally said, smiling almost in friendship. The whole thing was so easy that she was able to be sorry for him. "There is no one here named Rico," she said, and added indifferently, "We do not rent rooms."

Gregory leaned against the wall and began feverishly hunting through his pockets. Mrs. Grandi's eyes narrowed just percep-

tibly. Gregory finished his search and then his gaze came up to hers. Her eyes did not change at all but, looking at them, he felt himself entering a whole new dimension of knowledge. It seemed to him that he had not known anything about people or life or what a man could experience before. He hung there against the wall, thinking about this. Part of him wanted to run again, but only part of him, and besides he was now very tired.

After a while he closed his eyes, and when her black stony stare was shut out, he said, "Rico took the bankbook last night, didn't he? When he put me to bed."

"I do not know any Rico," said Mrs. Grandi.

Gregory opened his eyes. "I'm very thirsty," he said. "May I have a drink of water?"

"Certainly," Mrs. Grandi replied with courtesy. She called out in Italian. A waiter came in with a glass of water and put it on the table. Mrs. Grandi said something and motioned to Gregory. The waiter brought the glass over. It was the waiter named Cosimo. Gregory thought of asking Cosimo whether he knew him or not, but changed his mind. If Mrs. Grandi did not know him, it did not matter whether Cosimo seemed to or not. He took the glass, drank it down, and handed it back. Then he turned and went out the door.

Mrs. Grandi sat monumentally staring after him, her mind very slowly grinding over the scene. After a minute or two Rico came out of the inner room and said, "Shall I follow him?"

Mrs. Grandi shrugged. "Follow him if you want," she said. "It isn't necessary. He won't do anything."

She was quite right. Gregory did not even go near the bank, much less go in and report a stolen bankbook, made out to Peter Graham. ("What was the number of the book?" "I don't remember." "But you're Peter Graham?" "Yes." "May I see some identification?") Then Gregory would have had to turn around and walk out. As it was, he did not even go in.) He wandered erratically through the town and Rico wandered after, cursing him for his slowness and indecision. He was forever getting too close to Gregory, and having to hang back, and then rushing forward too quickly once more, terrified of having lost him.

At about noon, Gregory turned around and made straight toward his pursuer. Rico knew he should turn immediately to

get away, but the shambling and ungainly figure coming toward him held a kind of hypnotic spell. I must go, he thought, before he sees me, but he did not go. Then he thought that Gregory would stumble past him without seeing him at all. He shrank back against a wall and made himself as unobtrusive as possible. But he allowed himself the luxury of a long stare at the man he had drunk with and robbed.

Gregory stopped in front of him and said, "Rico, I'm hungry. Can you lend me a dollar?"

Rico met his eyes and said nervously, "I don't know you."

Gregory looked at him silently, his mouth slightly distorted by a smile.

Rico said, "I am sorry for you though, you poor man, if you are hungry. Here—here is a dollar." And he held out the bill.

Gregory took it without a word and went on down the street at his clumsy pace. Rico watched him go. "He might at least have said thank you," he muttered under his breath. Then suddenly he turned and walked sharply in the other direction.

While he was eating, Gregory remembered the two hundred dollars waiting for him at the post office. He was, for a moment, almost afraid to believe in it. But the food made him feel a little better. Before he went to the post office, however, he walked to the bus terminal. There would be a bus leaving in an hour. He went quickly now, as quickly as he could manage, to the post office. There was one terrible moment, opening the box, when he tried to imagine what he would do if the money wasn't there. His hand shook so for a second that he could not turn the knob. But it was there. He put the envelope in his pocket and went back to the bus terminal. Half an hour later he was on his way north.

It took Rico about three months to get Gregory's money out of the bank, but he managed it very cleverly, taking out small sums at a time. He had the menus Gregory had written to study for the handwriting, and he chose times to go in when the bank was fairly crowded. Mrs. Grandi took most of the money and put it away somewhere. Rico didn't know where.

CHAPTER 5

Spring comes late in Vermont—not slowly, but late. That year, after the early unseasonable warmth, it came later than ever. There was snow in April, snow in the first week of May. When Gregory left Washington the cherry trees, the magnolias, the dogwoods, the wistaria were already past the first intoxication of their flowering. But in Vermont a month later, bloom still strung the forsythia, the apple blossoms were just bursting their sticky buds, the pitch of the year was still rising. The grass and the new leaves of the maples still struck that eye-shattering note of yellow-green under the cold soft distant blue of the spring sky. The delicate hardy northern season, flavored by the cold of the long winter, was as sweet and crisp as an apple.

Gregory got off the bus in the little town without even knowing its name. They had been pushing up the valley from White River Junction, where he'd had breakfast, for an hour or so, through sparse farmland still too wet to plow, past occasional shabby houses needing paint, past orchards, past milk tins shining in the sun on their wooden platforms. The warm air in the bus smelled of engine fumes and human beings. Then the town began tentatively, with a closer grouping of houses and mailboxes. A sign or two said "Tourists." The bus drew up at an intersection sprinkled with road signs, the door opened, and the spring air came in. Gregory smelled it and unquestioningly got up and left the bus.

For the smell of the air was a promise. It was a promise that might have been made anywhere, in any of the towns he had passed through on the long journey north, or that might have held off for another two days. It was a function of the impulse of flight, now waning, and of fatigue which had broken down the motor impulses just enough to permit a moment of queerly lumi-

nous perception to reach him. It just happened that the promise was made to him here and that, getting off the bus, he stepped into not just a spring morning, but peace. Peace—for the first time in days, in weeks—he did not know how long. The first time in years, perhaps.

Nor was such peace a negative thing. The mere lifting of the load he carried lightened his spirit so that his feet, walking up Main Street, seemed not to touch the ground. To be free of pain was sheer glory. To be at peace was to be drunk with pleasure. If he had been a little less happy, if the joy that held him had been a little less deep, he would have sung. But as it was, he wasted no energy on expressing his delight. It was enough to experience it. The high blue sky arched over the town like a vacuum bell. Under it, in this place, he was safe, sheathed by a layer of pity only a molecule thick and the color of heaven.

He must have walked about for more than an hour. It was not a very big town that he had come to. Perhaps two or three thousand people lived there. The river meadow where it lay was cross-hatched with a dozen or so streets that started out purposefully from the green and ended either as country roads or simply at a fence—as if the wayfarer had stopped to lean on the rail and look at the view, and there had fallen into quiet and decided he'd come far enough. Along Main Street there were shops displaying shoes and boots, groceries, cotton house dresses, and hardware. There was a movie, the post office, two lawyers' offices, and a dentist's. There was a diner, and a restored inn with an electrified lamp on the gatepost and a signboard that began "Ye." There were three churches, the Congregational (white clapboard, beautifully New England) and the Episcopal (ugly gray stone) on the green, and the Catholic Church (clapboard, too, but painted gray) standing a block and a half from the center. The rest of the town was houses—most of them white, many of them standing behind picket fences. Gregory walked about and looked at them all.

It seemed to him that he had got into a new year. He had spent the spring of 1945 in Washington and the summer in Key West. So this must be a new year, since he had found here a new spring. It was not, of course, next year. It was not 1946. Indeed it was not any year with a number. It was an extra year

that had in some fashion been sucked in from alongside the regular time progression of his life; one of those possible years that cease to exist at every moment as time rushes us past them. Now in his need, the need itself being the creation of the vacuum into which this gift, the answer to the need, poured; now the possible had crossed the line and become real, had soaked through the membrane of consciousness and become, indistinguishably, a part of his life stream. A new year, a new spring, a new promise.

Most of the town was inhabited only by children. Main Street was crowded with women shopping and an occasional man, but in the rest of the town there was no one around but the children. It was Saturday, but Gregory did not know it. He did not, however, think it odd that there were so many children about. He merely thought it pleasant. They played singly or in pairs in the yards, digging in the damp earth. They squatted on the pavement, chalking it with pictures, legends, or the hieroglyphs of some game. A group of girls and two little boys were skipping rope. A flight of bigger boys went by on bicycles, whooping and bending over the handle bars as they pedaled. Gregory had never seen so many children alone and free, going about on their own occasions, since he had left the little Ohio town where he grew up to go to college.

He was fascinated by them; they slowed his pace. Did they, he wondered, play the same way that he had played forty years ago, the same games that had been played in a river town of southern Ohio when Theodore Roosevelt was President? He stopped at a gate in one of the neat white picket fences. Inside, three children of somewhere between four and seven played together in absorbed silence. They were constructing something from the muddy earth under the rhododendrons in front of the house. Was it a fort, Gregory wondered, or a castle? A house or a skyscraper? He leaned on the gate and watched. One of the children glanced up and saw him, and then went back to his play, ignoring the man by the gate as completely as if he had been another child, a stranger just moved into the neighborhood. Indeed, Gregory could remember just such a time, when his family had moved from one side of town to the other and for weeks (it seemed like weeks anyway) he'd leaned on the outside of gates watching other children play, no one speaking to him. So he leaned again,

telling himself that he was tired, and that he would go on as soon as he was sure what the children were making—a fort or a castle, a house or a skyscraper.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” cried a woman’s voice behind him. There was a rasp of fear in it, it was not merely irritated. “Jimmy,” it went on, to the boy who had looked at Gregory, “has this man been here long? Did he speak to you?”

The boy looked up again and strangely his eyes went first to Gregory’s before they looked behind him at the woman. He, too, heard the note of fear, and Gregory could see that he was startled by it. “Why should I be afraid of this man?” he seemed to ask, looking at Gregory himself for the clue. Gregory, instead of smiling at the boy, as his first impulse had been, only returned his look, gravely and steadily. Then, for one moment, as the look between them lengthened, a sense of communication with a fellow human being reached Gregory with a shock that made him dizzy.

“No ma’am,” said the boy, transferring his look to the woman. “He didn’t say nothing.” His expression had changed now to a mask of prudence, with curiosity glinting from his eyes. He looked at the two little girls he was playing with, and the three of them became conspirators. The woman must have felt them close ranks against her, for she turned angrily back to Gregory.

“What are you doing here?” she cried again, more shrilly. “I’ll have you arrested for loitering!”

She was absurd and he knew it, and yet he felt the old male fear of female violence awaken within him. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I just wanted to watch them—they’re so busy—they’re making something. I——”

“Well, you’ve watched enough,” she said. He had fallen away from the gate and she went past him and stood before it, barring him from passage. “Go along now,” she said, “go away.” Her hands gripped a string bag full of vegetables and a shabby black pocketbook instead of a flaming sword, but she was a formidable figure, before the gates of the garden.

A breeze sprang up then, curled down the street and under Gregory’s shabby jacket. He shivered suddenly. It was just a little spring wind, but it shook the daffodils in the next yard and chilled the pure light. “I’m sorry,” he said again, and turned away. All down the block he could feel the woman staring at him.

Just before he was out of earshot, the boy's singularly clear young voice asked, "What was the matter with that man, Aunt Min?" He didn't know what she answered.

It was colder than it had been. The breeze persisted. And the sky curdled a bit with cloud, or was it that he was now on the edge of town, with nothing to break the sweep of the wind? He had not, before now, felt chilly, but the wind reached him between the shoulder blades as he walked along, and he found himself trying to remember, again and again, what men usually did, or wore, to prevent the unsettling shiver which started from that spot. An overcoat, or a topcoat, he thought, and this answer was as impractical as if its achievement had depended upon a knowledge of non-Euclidean geometry. Obtaining an overcoat or a topcoat was as completely out of the question as working out a problem in astrophysics.

Now he had reached the end of the town. The houses lay behind him. A dirt road stretched ahead between dull brown-green fields striped casually here and there with shambling stone walls. Should he walk down that road? There seemed really no choice, and yet he hung helplessly where he was, unable to start. It was not that he hoped for any alternative to offer itself. He had forgotten how to hope. But he thought he would wait a little while before he started, just on the chance—— What chance? He did not know.

He saw the alternative at first without knowing what it was. It was a wooden building painted the regular New England barn red, but standing behind a high wire fence. And it was bigger than a barn. Then he saw the yellow brick chimney behind the building, and while he was still wondering what it was, an electric bell ripped the air with a sudden shocking clamor. After a minute or two a door swung open and a string of men came out into the pale steady sunlight. There were a couple of old wooden benches behind the wire and some of the men sat down on these and opened lunch boxes. A smaller group came out through the gate and walked quickly up toward the center of town.

Gregory had found a factory.

He walked over to the gate in the fence, pushed it open, and went quickly in without stopping to think. The men on the nearest bench looked up at him. Two of them were middle-aged,

their faces lightly creased, their blue eyes faded but still acute, full of quiet judgment. They had not looked alike when they were young, but thirty years of experience had produced the same markings, as bullets fired from the same gun show identical riflings. Then there was a younger man with dark curly hair and dark eyes that should have glinted and moved quickly but instead were dull, faintly stagnant. Gregory looked hastily from one to the other. At last he chose one of the older men who was looking back at him mildly.

"I want a job," he said.

The man chewed thoughtfully on his sandwich while he turned this over in his mind. Then, his mouth empty, he said, "Go in and see Mr. Peters."

"Mr. Peters," Gregory repeated unnecessarily. His heart was going like a trip hammer. He wanted to turn and run out the gate again, but he remembered the dull prospect of the muddy road running off hopelessly through the dun fields. "Mr. Peters," he said. "Is he the boss?"

"He's the boss," said the man calmly. Then he added, "What's your name?"

Gregory blinked at him, the world revolved, his heart hammered. "John Gregory," he said. It was the first time he had told anyone his name since he left Washington. He waited a moment, having spoken, but the man went back to his sandwich and there was nothing for Gregory to do but turn away and walk slowly, with dragging feet, over the mud of the yard toward the door of the factory and Mr. Peters.

Mr. Peters hired him. In May 1945, he hired everything that walked in the door and offered itself to him. He already had, on his pay roll, three boys back from the war with what people were learning to call psychoneuroses. And he was under no illusion whatever about why the middle-aged man sitting across from him, who wanted a job, licked his lips before he answered any question and played continually with the brim of his hat. He claimed to have worked in a machine shop before, but Mr. Peters was hardly encouraged to discover that this had been during the summer vacations when he was going to college, approximately twenty-five years ago. (Mr. Peters had long since got past the point of wondering why a college man wanted unskilled work

from him. He'd got past it, specifically, in 1931.) And one shrewd glance had told him that, though the man's nails were dirty and broken, his hands were uncallused and incapable-looking. But Mr. Peters had, during the past three years, come more and more to act upon one simple axiom—that half a man is better than none. So he hired this man and told him to report to the shipping room, where he could help crate up the shell noses, the marine oil burners, and the locomotive parts that Jennings Engineering was turning out.

“Now?” the man asked him.

“That's right,” Mr. Peters said. “We're working four hours overtime this afternoon. That'll give you time and a half. Or you can wait till Monday, if you want. But you might as well start now and make your time and a half.”

“Yes,” said Gregory, and got up blankly. Mr. Peters explained again where the shipping room was, gave Gregory a slip of paper, and told him the name of the foreman to give it to.

“Yes,” said Gregory again, but he still did not go. He could feel Mr. Peters getting a little impatient, but there was something he had to say. He took a deep breath, blurted it out. “My name is John Gregory.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Peters, “I have that.”

Gregory turned and went out the door, past Mr. Peters' secretary, the girl at the switchboard, the dozen or so others of the office help—girls in sweaters, men in shiny blue serge. He started down the stairs. The break for lunch was over, the machines had begun to clank below him, he was terrified. Halfway down he stopped, hoping desperately some way of escape would open, but there was no way out but down the stairs, down into the noise and the strangeness. Then the door at the foot swung open, and a young man ran lightly upstairs toward him. Gregory went on then, went hastily down, pushed open the door, and came out into the room where the big machines rolled themselves about. He only wanted to get out now, get out and get away. He hesitated, looking around for the right door. As he stood there preparing for flight, the man whom he had spoken to in the yard came over and took the slip of paper from Gregory's fingers. He read it, nodded, not trying to speak over the clamor of the machines, and led Gregory through a swing door.

"Where——" Gregory began.

"Right here," said his mentor, swung open another door, and took him back into noise.

A round man with liquid brown eyes and a grin came up. "Hi, Cap," he said.

"Here's John Gregory," said the man addressed as Cap. "Bill Peters just hired him," and he handed over the slip of paper. "This is Tony Ruggiero, Greg, he's your foreman in shipping." He nodded and went out the door, back to his machines.

Gregory stared at Tony in absolute panic. He wanted to say that he had to get out, that it was all a mistake, it was absurd to think he could do anything so difficult, so degrading, so difficult, so—— But he couldn't get the words out. So when Tony transferred his grin to him and said, "O.K., Greg, glad to see you," there was nothing he could do but go along with him, and set to work on the thankless and splintery task of crating up the intricate, anonymous objects the machines had spawned.

He worked all afternoon at it, and when the bell shrilled out again, Tony told him that he was getting the hang of it nicely. He stood wiping his forehead with a dirty handkerchief held in one aching hand, and deep within him something stirred, something strange, an emotion he had not felt for years—or ever?—and that was yet not completely unfamiliar. Could it be pride? When he walked out of the door of the Jennings Engineering Plant, he was a man with a job.

But he wasn't, of course, a man with a home. Going out of the factory was all right; he didn't mind leaving the cement-floored room and the piles of crates that would be loaded on trucks that night, he didn't mind at all the idea of coming back there on Monday. He stopped on the vestigial pavement outside the factory fence not because leaving was important and symbolic, but because he didn't know where to go next. Tony passed him and said, "Good night," and the young man he'd noticed eating his lunch with Cap, who was Tony's nephew back from Tulagi, nodded. They were friendly, their voices were calm with good will, and they undoubtedly would have helped him if he had asked them to suggest a place where he could get a room. But it didn't occur to him to ask them. It was impossible for him to understand that his problem could be of concern to anyone else, that

anyone in the world could take an interest in him and help him out. It was not that he distrusted people. Even after knowing Rico and Mrs. Grandi in Key West, he did not distrust people. But it did not seem likely to him that he was real enough, that he cast enough of a shadow in the human world, to impinge on anyone else's perceptions.

His rescuer, therefore, by the familiar paradox, would have to be someone of great and delicate perceptions, someone who could divine by pure intuition what was troubling this poor and distressed human spirit, and who, having learned this, would go further—would not only understand, but would put himself to the infinite inconvenience of helping another man. Not knowing how much of a miracle he demanded, knowing only that if he was not helped he could not help himself, unable to take the gross step of communicating in the easy verbal way with words worn smooth by millions of lips, Gregory hung outside the factory gate, able to go only a yard past it toward the great world.

In perhaps three minutes his rescuer came out. There was nothing dramatic about it. To Cap Richards, Gregory was simply a man he had helped a bit, and somehow, by so doing, incurred an obligation to help a bit more. "Hello, Greg," he said. "Did you make out all right?"

Gregory turned his eyes away from Tony and his nephew piling into an old Chevrolet with three companions. "Yes, thanks," he said. "At least I think so."

"That's good. Where are you staying? Do you have a room someplace?"

"No," said Gregory simply. Cap had started walking and Gregory fell into step with him, but his heart was beating painfully and he breathed rank air through a fog of anxiety as he waited for what Cap might say next.

It was all right, but he almost couldn't believe it. Cap said matter-of-factly, "Then you'd better come along with me. My sister's got a room empty. It's clean and it's handy, and for thirteen dollars a week she'll give you your meals besides—breakfast and dinner and put up a lunch for you. I tell you the rate right off so you'll know. It's not cheap, but food's hard to get now, some of it, and she says it's going up. Do you want to come?"

"I——" said Gregory, and swallowed hard. "Yes," he went on,

but for a minute or two that was all he could manage. Then his voice was all right and he said, "Thanks very much," but he couldn't look at Cap yet because his eyes were still full of tears.

A block or two farther on he said, "Will it be all right with your sister? I haven't—I haven't a bag, or anything. I haven't—even got a clean shirt."

"It'll be all right," said Cap. "I'll tell her it's all right. And the stores are open till nine this evening. I'll take you downtown after dinner and you can get a shirt—what you need. Do you have enough money?" His voice hesitated a little over the last question.

"I have about forty dollars," said Gregory.

Cap nodded and they walked on in silence.

His room was on the third floor of the big shabby gabled brown house. It had once, presumably, been a maid's room—or rather, a room for the hired girl. But that would have been in an era when a hired girl's soul was considered as transcendent and expandable as anyone else's, and when a hired girl's body normally sat down and ate with the family after dishing up the dinner at noon into the blue willowware and setting it on the round table in the dining room. It was a very pleasant room, quite bare, and with a faded and minutely patterned wallpaper, a white-painted iron bed, a Boston rocker, a round hooked rug, a bureau with a marble top, and a matching commode supporting a hand-painted pitcher, washbowl, and soap dish. A huck hand towel and a bath towel (the bathroom was on the floor below) hung on a towel rack beside it. There was a narrow crack of a closet which held three wire clothes hangers. They were ample for Gregory's wardrobe, and the room was ample for his spirit.

It reduced the necessary business of living to a decent minimum. Here one could sleep, could sit down and rest, could keep clean, could tidy one's possessions out of sight, with the least possible fuss. That tyrant, the body, was not allowed to encroach an inch upon the time and territory that should be free of his importunities. Discomfort was avoided because discomfort awoke nagging muscles and nerves to disturb the mind. But the mean luxuries of comfort and indulgence, each dragging another in its train, each swallowing inch by inch further and further strips of the country of the mind—these were denied. You could sit down

here and read, you could sit down and think, you could sit down and meditate upon the maple leafing out beyond the window. But you could not sit down here and lounge into sloth to the blaring of the radio. In this room sloth was still one of the deadly sins.

Not that Gregory was, in the accepted sense, busy as Cap Richards, for instance, was. Cap had the kind of skill with his mechanic's hands that, in gardening, is called a green thumb. He repaired electric appliances and provided them with small ingenious improvements; he tinkered with lawn mowers and straightened out the bent wheel of a tricycle belonging to little Nora Daley next door; above all, he whittled, concocting with his big four-bladed knife the most delicate feats of carving. Gregory, watching him, could suddenly understand the taste of the mechanically minded 1880s for the horrible filigree work with which their citizens adorned their houses—it must have been such fun to figure out how it was done!

Gregory himself attempted none of this constant activity. His battered, sore hands that were so unwillingly learning their tasks at Jennings lay idle. He would sit in his chair with them folded in his lap, looking at the maple and rocking. He would lie on the bed, his shoes removed so as not to soil the white counterpane, and look at the maple. Occasionally he would join Cap tinkering away in the kitchen or on the back porch and watch him wordlessly, deriving some deep content, some healing, simply from absorbing the skill of Cap's hands at work on wood or metal. But such companionship, such content, was too potent an emotional tension for him to bear very long. Sooner or later he would go back to his room, back to the window, back to the great green gilded tree outside, and sit and rock quietly while the spring wind, the breezes of early summer, moved manifest in the leaves.

What did he think about? He did not, particularly, think at all. It was more passive. He was not thinking, he was being thought. The I within him had been stretched too far and put to tasks beyond its capacity, farfetched and meaningless disciplines whose very existence—much more their exercise and elaboration—was a constant tour de force. It had been stretched until it had splintered brittlely into half a hundred hard jangling bits of personality, none of which was big enough to provide a significant clue

to the real shape of the man named John Gregory. Now, in the peaceful late light of afternoon between the time when Jennings' electric bell jangled the end of the day and the time when Cap's sister, Mrs. Wood, struck the Chinese gong for six o'clock dinner, in the long twilight evenings and the mornings when the waking day became immanent in the maple, now these unrelated bits of what Gregory had been were beginning to melt together. Nothing was being re-formed, not yet, but the hopeless, uncompromising, jagged edges that tore the fingers trying to fit them together were disappearing. Some hitherto unknown warmth was smoothing the broken roughness into bright liquid drops of anonymous metal—metal for recasting, redrawing, reforging.

The first medicine, the first precipitate of healing, was memory. The great tree outside transformed the world. Its boughs shaped and limited the sky. Its leaves made of the sun not an impersonal force of physics, but a particular minute botanical datum, the life of the dainty finite complication of greenness that clothed the tree. Tutelary deity, phallic and upstanding, it was also the feminine promise of rest, of form, of containedness. Lying in bed in the morning, looking into the green world, Gregory began to create the memories that had lain so long folded small, crushed shapelessly together, out of mind, out of sight.

"Once upon a time there was a boy who found a dead woodchuck, just dead, I guess, at any rate gone limp but not cold. (But it was summer, it could not have been cold, it was lying in the sun and the sun was hot.) He was limp and there was a fly on his nose, and the boy knew what it was to be dead. It was to be limp.

"The clothes that hung limp on the line were dead. But in spring the wind filled them, snapped them, blew them out hard, and for a while they were alive and danced. And the fish that lived in the river were blown into their sleek torpedo shapes by the water running and running, by the current, sustained by the pressure. They died in the air because the pressure was gone, there was nothing to hold them steady. They rotted into death in the soft air.

"So life was a force that blew and blew and filled this and that, the fish and the woodchuck and the clothes and himself, they all had a little piece of it for a while, sustained by the pressure, by

the wind of life. You could die because the mouth that the wind blew upon, blew in through, was closed against the wind, because you grew frightened and drew it shut, pulling the drawstring tighter and lighter to let in less and less, until what you permitted to enter was no longer enough, not enough to blow you out strong and terrible and proud, dancing on the wind. And you collapsed into limpness. That was one way of death.

“But the other was when, by itself, for its own reasons and its own laws, the wind dropped for a second around you, as it suddenly drops on a March day, and everything plunges into stillness. So if you did not kill yourself, you died later like that, in the icy truth of stillness.

“And the boy wondered about the woodchuck. How could a woodchuck die the first way? It was only people who did that. The wind must have dropped just there a moment ago—— (He knew now, remembering the hot sun, that it need not have been a moment ago, but he thought then that he had not seen by just a fraction of time.) And he felt the wind blowing so strong, so proud, within himself, blowing him taller, and he thought, ‘But I have enough to give some away. I know I have enough. I must give it away, it is more than I can use.’ And he stretched out his hand and put it on the woodchuck’s head and said, ‘Arise.’

“And there in the sun in the meadow in the hot smell of daisies and the half weeds, half flowers, the wild carrot and yarrow and buttercups and mullein, terror awoke. The wind that should have blown through him, out of his finger tips into the small dead furry body, could not break through the flesh, the counterforce sprang up, the resistance, terror. He had not known that was what terror was. It was the fright of the flesh, the shriek of pain from the fiber that would be violated by the passage of the spirit. Yes, the wind within was big and proud, there was too much, more than he could use, but he could not free it and use it this way. The insulation of the flesh was too strong and stubborn. The wind would have to mount and mount, by squares and cubes and higher powers, the flesh would have to refine itself under the inner wisdom of this pressure, comb itself into a pattern of stress, delicate, interlocking, veined with power, before the interstices so created could open this way in primary contact with the world. If he had more power than he could use, he had impossibly not

enough for this thing. 'Lazarus, come forth!' And after four days——

"But the terror had been understood and conquered by then, had become something else, an instrument for its own defeat. While for him, the boy in the field, it grew beyond proportion horrible, bursting up to the sky, and he drew back his hand as if he'd been burned. A little breeze came then and ruffled the fur on the animal, blowing it apart, showing the skin, and then he was only sorry for it, he wanted to cry for the woodchuck. All the knowledge and exaltation contracted to this small sentimental emotion, and instead of resurrecting it, he buried the woodchuck—quickly, shallowly, because by the time he had halfway scrabbled a hole, he was bored, remembering that he had come out to go fishing and feeling his intention nagging at him to hurry."

One day when he had been working at Jennings awhile—more than a week, but how much more he wasn't sure—he looked up from his eternal nailing and hammering to find Mr. Peters beside him. He looked at him for a moment, startled, and wondering. Was something more to be asked of him? What message did Mr. Peters bear, what command? He straightened up and put down the hammer. His hand lingered on it, waiting for the order to leave it forever.

And Mr. Peters did say, "Greg, you've operated a drill, haven't you?"

Gregory supposed he must have said so, though he couldn't remember either saying it or at any time actually undertaking such a job. But Peters did not mix people up and, because of his faith in the man, Gregory nodded.

"Come on in here then. Let's see you use a single spindle." He looked over Gregory's shoulder, nodded at Tony, and led Gregory through the pocket of stillness that was the stair well into the shop.

The clamor here was different from the banging in the shiping room, the whine of the steel taper. That noise was individual and unrelated, incidental. But in the machine shop the noise was part of the making: it peeled off the drills like the bright curls of steel that spun with the bits, it echoed the heavy drive of the boring mills, and, muffled by the stream of mahogany oil, none-

theless spiraled thinly from the screw machines and turret lathes. Walking through it occasionally, Gregory had been frightened, and now he expected to be more frightened than ever at the idea of becoming a part of this constant noisy act of creation.

But it was with excitement that he was shaking as Mr. Peters repeated the things he must know already if he was to be able to run the machine at all; when he took the flat triangles of steel wedged into the wooden makeshift (there were too few of them to bother with a jig) his hands took charge by themselves. Yes, we've done this before, they seemed to say, we know how even if you don't. They moved independently of him, with dexterity and grace, the steel flowed into proper contact with the machine, the bit leaped down to drill, the song of metal biting into metal sprang up and held for a moment—just long enough—and Gregory, as if playing by ear, lifted the drill, shifted the work beneath it, and brought it down again.

"O.K.!" said Mr. Peters. Gregory heard surprise in his voice, but he heard pleasure too.

"I guess it's like riding a bike," he said, "if you once know how, you don't forget." Finishing the piece, he felt as proud of the banal small change of conversation as of his unexpected ability. He stopped the machine and grinned at Peters shyly. "After all," he went on, "I did nothing else for four months one summer, and the year after that I worked a radial." The queer thing was that he could remember it perfectly, now. And yet there was something wrong with the memory, too, he realized—for he'd always thought of himself as rather a bad workman. He'd resented the job—a Polack's job, a Hunky's job. He'd taken it for the money. That was in the last war (or the first war). He'd been seventeen or eighteen, half wanting to volunteer, half glad so many of the upperclassmen were gone from the campus that youngsters his age, who normally would have been pretty much unknown, had blossomed two years early into fame. But in order to go on blossoming, he'd had to work in the summers. And the factories paid twice what a respectable white-collar job did. He'd made thirty-five dollars a week—almost what he was making now. He'd hated it, though, he'd always thought, hated the noise and the smell and the immigrant workers jabbering their own tongue around him, hated it with the unequivocal snobbery of the very young and

very shy. While he'd been ashamed of the snobbery later, he'd never penetrated behind it, never really understood what he'd felt.

Only now, watching his own deft hands at work on the mind-forgotten, flesh-remembered task, did he realize that he hadn't hated it at all. Now he remembered pride he'd never felt, companionship he'd refused to acknowledge, and it occurred to him for the first time that he had been a good workman. He'd kept up to the average, passed it more than half the time. Good God, they'd have fired him, or moved him to other work if he hadn't been any good! But the only move he'd made had been upward, to the big radial drill and five cents an hour more. That hadn't happened because the foreman had been impressed with the fact that he could quote Keats, or because he was editor of the college paper in his sophomore year. It had been because he was a good drill operator. He experienced a sustained sensation of shock as this obvious fact grew slowly into place in his mind. It threw all his assumptions out of kilter. He was a good workman! He handled the concept over and over, feeling around it for every detail. It was like finding a submerged rock when you were floundering in water beyond your depth. It was like turning out a desk drawer, full of odds and ends, and coming upon a letter five years old telling you that you'd inherited a farm. I should have realized it before, he thought, shaking his head. It seemed to him that he must have missed a great deal of pleasure by his stupidity. I wish I'd known, he repeated to himself. I could have made so many things for Timmy; we'd have had fun together.

Timmy! And with the name, a crescendo of grief broke over his head like a clash of cymbals, as quick, as startling, and as suddenly gone. He opened his eyes wide, staring at the clever hands which did not miss a movement. He held on hard to the patterns they made, and after a minute or two they began to weave a spell. A spell to hold grief at bay, to limit it if it could not be reduced. I'm a good workman, he thought, I'm a good drill operator. The words blew on the little spark of pride and confidence, his attention focused there. He worked on carefully through the afternoon.

It was nice that, walking home, he didn't have to tell Cap, because Cap knew already. Cap, setting up a big job on one of

the boring mills, had seen the whole thing. Along the pavement thick with catkins from the trees, he walked home rich not only in his new self-respect but in Cap's pride in him. It was Cap's idea that they stop and buy some beer. The reason he gave was the heat, he didn't make it a gesture of celebration, but Gregory knew it was. At Cap's sister's they sat on the porch together, drinking the cold beer and talking the casual talk of equals.

Mrs. Wood came out after a while and sat down in a rocker, her neat mouse-colored hair caught up in a net, her neat gray dress covered by a neat lavender-printed Mother Hubbard. She rocked gently, fanning herself with a paper fan advertising Muldowney's Ice Cream, and complaining in a small decided way of the weather which, she seemed to think, had grown so hot in conscious defiance of the fact that she'd planned a boiled dinner. Cap and Gregory sat on the floor, one on each side of the stoop, leaning against the porch pillars, in recognition of being unclean, since they'd stopped to drink their beer before they went to wash up. The talk wandered on with small bends and forks, like a network of old footpaths and as familiar. When Cap told his sister that Gregory was working a drill, she groaned over how dirty his shirts would now become.

At last she told them to finish their beer and go clean up for dinner.

"Don't rush us now, Nelly," said Cap. "Lem Barlow says there ain't going to be much beer around this summer. Let's enjoy it while we can."

"Mmp," said Mrs. Wood. "A beer shortage now. Well, I must say I'd ruther see beer scarce than butter or meat, but will you tell me what good it's going to do the starving people of Europe? Beer!"

"It's made from grain, Mrs. Wood," said Gregory. "They can't spare the grain for it. Or at least I think that's it," he finished tentatively. I ought to know that! he thought. Funny not to be sure.

"Well, praise be, if they can find a good use for what goes into beer. Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging."

"That's not beer, Nelly," said Cap mildly. "'Tain't a mocker, and it certainly don't rage. But I'm glad there's something scarce you're pleased about."

"Sugar!" said Mrs. Wood, and made it expletive. "No extra sugar for canning! What about all my berries, I'd like to know? No jam, no relish, no ketchup——" She ran down the list as if calling reprovingly on a pantheon of unresponsive household goddesses.

Cap groaned and drank off the rest of his beer. "Guess we'd better clean up," he said loudly, and started for the house. But Mrs. Wood had a new point to make.

"Mr. Gregory," she said, "I've been meaning to ask you about your ration book. Cap, here, and most of my lodgers let me handle them, but if you'd rather just give me the stamps each week, I'm sure Mr. Barlow won't mind. I don't want to bother you about it, and I know how men are, you don't think of such housekeeping things. But it's almost three weeks now, and while I've got points to go along on, it isn't fair to the others to have you eating up their meat and sugar and canned things. I know it just slipped your mind, but if I could have it now—or else some of the stamps—I'd appreciate it."

One foot on the top step, one on the porch, his lunch box in his hand, and his jacket over his arm, Gregory looked at her and was turned to stone. A great fluctuating wave of memories swept over him. He remembered getting the book in a public school in Washington, he remembered wasting two weeks' stamps on cheese, he remembered Marion and the butter—— The ration book, the extra vital organ, the talisman, the fetish needed to complete one's personality—and of course he couldn't give it to her. I might have known, he thought. I might have known it couldn't last, that they'd find out. What am I going to do? What am I going to tell her? He could feel the sweat break out all over him as he hunted for something to say.

Something to say—but he never could have imagined it would be the words he did find, said with such apparent calm. "I'll have to write for it, Mrs. Wood. I left it—with friends, where I stayed."

Mrs. Wood tut-tutted at such carelessness and said something about friends using up all the stamps, present and future, he was too trusting.

"I'm sure that won't happen," he said firmly. "I wish you'd mentioned it sooner. I'm afraid I can't be sure of getting it in

under a week. They mayn't get my letter right off—it may have to be forwarded, I mean. I hope that will be all right."

"Guess it'll have to be," Mrs. Wood sniffed, but Gregory knew that her bark was worse than her bite, and that he had satisfied her. He went in feeling better. He had escaped by a hairbreadth, he felt, from some peril.

Only, while he scrubbed his hands, he realized that he hadn't escaped at all. Because he would have to get the book. And to get the book he would have to—have to what? His mouth refused to shape the impossible answer. The Washington school, Marion, his whole life—he would have to reach out for it all!

I know, he thought suddenly, almost dizzy with relief. I know! I'll write to Rose!

CHAPTER 6

It was on a steamy Washington afternoon that Rose came home from her new job in the Surplus Administration and found the letter. The mail had been shoved under the door and she picked it up and carried it from the dark little hall into the living room. She dropped the letters on the table, spread them out, and looked at them idly as she took off her hat and gloves. Four letters for Katie, her roommate, two for herself, a usual proportion (I'll probably have to wash these gloves again tonight), and the last letter probably for Katie too. She turned it over, saw Gregory's handwriting, and sank down on the sofa-bed. She was too frightened to open it.

I can't stand it, she thought. Not again! The panic haste with which she'd torn open the envelope from Key West only to find inside that blank sheet of paper with her name the only thing on it, the wavering jerky writing frightening her more—the memory was too close. I can't stand it, she repeated. Why should I have to, why does it happen to me? Can't I just tear it up? Tear it up and throw it away without looking?

But in spite of herself, her hands had taken possession of it. She held it up to the light, still playing with the idea of throwing it away (but she knew she was only playing with it), and saw that there really was writing on the paper inside. Then her hands took over again and ripped the envelope across roughly. She shut her eyes while she unfolded the sheet to keep herself from cheating by reading any words or snatching at any hints until she had the beginning before her.

"Dear Rose," said the letter, "I hope you are well. I am feeling much better. I am working up here now, doing all right. Don't worry about me. I have had some trouble, but I am all right now."

My God! Rose thought. Cold horror stopped her for a moment from reading any further. It's a good thing I knew the handwriting because I would never have recognized—— It's like a child! Oh John, oh darling, she whispered, not knowing she had used the word, oh John—— But the tenderness could not drive away the horror, it only mingled with it. She went on with the letter.

"I wonder if you could get my ration book and send it to me." Oh no! cried Rose to herself. "I hope this will not be too much trouble. I need it for the lady I am boarding with. Please mail it to General Delivery, White River Junction, Vermont.

"Thank you very much for your trouble, Rose. Please do not worry about me. Or try to find me. I am not in White River. I will write you soon again, when I have more news.

"Yours sincerely,

"JOHN GREGORY"

What am I going to do? thought Rose. She could hear the question repeating itself over and over again, but she knew that she was not yet ready to answer it——indeed, that she was not yet really asking it. She was so used to being practical for other people, so used to finding herself asked to cope with a situation which had run on and got out of hand, that the question had become almost a reflex. It was her job——and for so long it had been particularly her job for John. What am I going to do? she thought, but she was still too appalled by the letter to be able to imagine doing anything at all. What she really wished was that she had not read it, that she *had* actually torn it up and thrown it away unopened. She glanced down at it in her lap and traced out a word or two, but she did not read it again. Her fingers merely followed the curves of the letters Gregory had made, as if his trouble might be communicated more easily by the sense of touch than by the cold transit of sight.

But what am I going to do? the question cried within her. If I went there—— Where is it? White River Junction? "I am not in White River," said the letter. If I went there could I find him? And if I found him—— But she could not imagine what she would find. The crippled letter, that awful morning when she had seen him last, if these were clues to what John had become,

she could not follow them. "I am working up here now." What could he be working at? "Doing all right." That was pathetic. Oh John, oh—— "Doing all right. Don't worry." She put her head down on the arm of the sofa, but she couldn't cry. Her emotions were too confused, too shaken, for any one to isolate itself enough to cry over. She felt closer to laughter, to the double-edged laughter of shock through which we become able to accept what has been impossible, to believe the incredible.

And the ration book! That was fantastic. To disappear into the unknown, to have torn her heart with terror and at the same time to have left upon her shoulders (as he had so often left the gremlin hordes of detail) the enormous, hardly possible burden of making his disappearance plausible and unremarked. She and Ellen had done it, working together, thinking at first that he would telephone in a couple of hours, that if he did not go home at once, he surely would by night, trying to let no one know while the conviction grew stronger that something must have happened. Then the calls to the hospitals and the debate that went on and on, the sides switching as they argued each other around, should they tell the police? Then the call from the bank official, the knowledge that Gregory was not hurt, had money, and the increasing conviction which Rose and Ellen both experienced that he had run away. Each had been sure long before the words admitting it were spoken aloud. And at last the realization that the Secretary would have to know. . . . Ellen did that, thank heaven. And the cautious press story the Secretary let out, the letter of resignation because of ill-health that she and Ellen forged—but it had all been blanketed by the President's death, it had really been easier than one would have imagined. And now, of course, the Secretary himself had resigned, Ellen had left Washington, Rose had a new job and a new boss. Time had flowed together over the place John Gregory had left until you would never have known that he had been there at all.

Now, out of the void, a message had arrived—a message asking for his ration book. When she had thought he was dead! A ration book for the hereafter, for heaven or hell or purgatory. Probably for purgatory, she thought, because surely if she could forgive him hell, God would too. And that at last she found funny

enough to laugh over for a minute and so pave the way for the burst of tears that followed.

When she stopped crying, her question was answered. She knew what she had to do. She had to tell Ellen that she had heard from John.

She leaned back on the sofa and rested with this knowledge at her heart. Did it lie there like a stone, or was its weight rather an iron core of determination and strength? In any case, it would have to be done. Why should the tears have told her that, have reminded her that she was not the person in the center of the tragedy? Perhaps because she had cried more often for others than for herself—cried for John himself once, his deputy mourner when his own tears for Timmy did not come. But the letter itself should have been enough, she thought, the very fact that he wrote to her instead of to Ellen. She did not have the ration book. Logically this request, which could be, she thought, only a flimsy excuse for writing, should not have been made to her. Ellen had the book if anyone did. Why didn't he write to Ellen? He must have known that Rose would have to go to her, that at best she could be no more than an intermediary.

But of course! she thought. That was what he wanted! The letter to her was just an excuse, a device for a message to Ellen that he had not been able to send direct. Why had she not seen it?

Why not? The old weary argument began again that she had had so often with Katie and so many times more often with herself. I don't love him, I really don't. I'm not kidding myself. Yes, I *was* glad that he turned to me. Of course I'm glad when he does. But that doesn't mean I love him. (And it doesn't! she repeated.) I'm a giving person, I know that. And I'm fond of him. We worked together for eight years—how could I help but be fond of him? I was just a kid in the typing pool when he picked me out the first time he rated a secretary. But to insist on making it romantic, sentimental—to take a perfectly honest affection and intimacy and ability to get along with him (it's not easy, I *have* worked to understand him) and try to make it into unrequited love—it's absurd. It's stupid and silly and narrow-minded and—yes—vulgar. I haven't the faintest desire for him and never have had. I know perfectly well how limited our rela-

tionship is, and I'm glad to have it that way. There are plenty of girls like me in Washington—and other places too, I daresay—who have a kind of easy, dusty, working intimacy with men, with their bosses, which is no more love than—than any friendship.

"Sure," Katie would say at this point, "I know it, I know it. I'm secretary to the Honorable Amos, aren't I, and will be till the next election, at least? But you give him too much. You mark my words. You'll never get married till you quit working for him. You don't love him, O.K., but he doesn't leave you room for any other man. I wish you'd fire him, Rose."

"And who shall I marry?" said Rose. "Jack in Noumea or Tommy in New Delhi or one of the page boys at the Senate? This is a fine time to get married, indeed. It's not that they're too young or too old—it's that they aren't here at all."

After Gregory had vanished Katie had never mentioned it again. Why had it come back now to Rose to plague her? Nothing has changed, she thought, and he turned to me only because he couldn't bear to write to Ellen.

She was suddenly angry. She stood up, went to her desk, and pulled out an envelope. If the message is for Ellen, then I'll just send the letter on to her, she thought. If he meant it for her, let her have it! And she sat down and wrote Ellen's address in Norfolk with a vicious drive of her pen. But when she went over to the sofa for Gregory's letter she couldn't do it. She tried, but she kept seeing those pathetic, helpless, childish phrases which had, after all, been written to her. Been written only to her. Because he trusted her not to betray him. He was willing to let her see his weakness and she knew—had always known—that he was not willing for Ellen to see it. Always Rose had protected him. Always she had been ready to bear his impotent anger and frustration to save him from having to show them to Ellen. Probably she had not saved him entirely, probably he had still occasionally had to strip himself before Ellen. But Rose had done what she could. She heard Katie's voice saying, "You give him too much." No, she thought, it's just that I'm loyal.

If there was any loyalty left in her, she must help him now, now that he had again trusted her—trusted her, turned to her, thought of her out of what need she could not imagine, but the crippled sentences showed how strong it was. To have to write

and to be able to write no better than that! Oh John, John—— But she dared not cry again. Not now, not over the big thing, his trouble and his hurt. That would be material for a whole night of tears, a solemn high mass of weeping. Now she had things to do.

For she did actually have to let Ellen know about this if only, on the simplest plane, to ask her to send him the ration book. "General Delivery, White River Junction, Vermont," she repeated, picked up the telephone, and dialed long distance.

There was a delay, of course. The Washington–New York circuits were always impossibly jammed then, and Rose waited long enough to wash her face and smoke two cigarettes before the call came through. But not once did she take up Gregory's letter to read again.

The phone jangled under her hand. She picked it up and as she did so thought momentarily, Here I am doing this, and Ellen is too. If I'm not sure what I feel at least I know what I have to tell her. But Ellen——what a mixture of fear, and hope, and urgency to know, she must be feeling! And for a second, as if the telephone were a conductor of emotions as well as electrical impulses, the hand holding the receiver became Ellen's hand, and Rose felt herself transfixed with the current of Ellen's terror. I am Ellen, thought Rose. She is me. We are each a different side of the same thing, our very separateness binds us into one. . . . And then the sense of this community altogether disappeared and Rose was simply someone holding a telephone, waiting to speak, waiting to deliver a message about an event totally exterior to herself. Rose had forgotten that for a moment she had been Ellen. Now, as she put the telephone to her ear and said hello, she was Fate. Impersonal, external, the bearer of news, not a person but a part of the event, since without her it would never reach Ellen. She was the impact of the blow, not the flesh that felt it.

"On your call to Norfolk, Connecticut," said the operator, "they wish to know who is calling."

"Miss Rose Carmody. Tell Mrs. Gregory—— No, never mind."

"Miss Rose Carmody is calling."

Then Rose heard vague noises, someone calling her name out, an indefinable, faint but hostile clamor, as if Ellen were walking

to the phone over knives and embers laid tenderly under her feet by her solicitous family to keep her from stepping just there, in the one place where she really had to walk. Perhaps she won't come at all, thought Rose.

The next moment Ellen's voice spoke in her ear, clear, cool, self-contained, as it always sounded. "Rose?" she said. The operator broke in unnecessarily to make sure that she was Mrs. Gregory, and then the wire was humming between them out of the hot little room where Rose sat alone to the great house where Ellen had taken refuge, humming and humming, and Rose suddenly did not know what to say.

"Rose?" said Ellen again. "How are you? Is it terribly hot there? Have you heard from John?"

"Yes," said Rose. "That's why I called."

"I wondered," said Ellen. She was silent for a minute, and Rose realized she was gathering her strength to listen. This is hard for her, Rose thought, and heard the weariness under Ellen's clear voice as she said, "What does he say?"

"He's in White River Junction, Vermont. No, not in it, near it. He says he's working. He—says he's all right. But I don't think he is."

Again the pause before Ellen spoke, and all Rose's generosity rose to fill the pause with pity. Oh, I'm sorry for her, thought Rose, and Ellen said, "No, I suppose he's not. But at least he's there, he's working. I mean—at least we know—— What's he doing? Working on a paper? Teaching?"

"He doesn't say, but I don't think so. The letter—it's not written easily. If he were teaching or writing for a paper, the letter would be—would be—easier. Smoother. Do you see what I mean?"

"I wonder what he can be doing," was all Ellen said. Her voice had grown fainter, as if she were talking to herself. She went on meditatively, "I can't think what. And in Vermont. Is this the first letter you've had?"

For a moment Rose was simply shocked at the question. Then behind the shock she felt uneasiness growing. For the question was not edged with resentment or jealousy. Ellen seemed simply to be attempting to get more information. But though there might be no jealousy, there was equally no occasion for jealousy,

and Rose would have a right to reply indignantly, in shocked tones, Of course it is! Don't you think I would have let you know?

Then why was it so hard for her to answer? Was it because Ellen's freedom from jealousy was another reason for pity, because only a woman incoherent emotionally and in despair could ask such a question? Or was it perhaps because of a scribbled envelope mailed at Key West containing nothing but pain which Rose had borne alone, had clung possessively to bearing alone? Was it Ellen's despair or Ellen's simplicity? Was it Rose's pity or Rose's guilt that held them silent? Then Rose said—but gently, gently, “Yes, this is the first letter,” and though it was true, knew it to be a lie, for she could not have answered truthfully if Ellen had phrased it, Have you heard from him before? or, Has he written you?

Now I am lying, she thought, and Ellen asked, “What else does he say?”

“Well—nothing really.” Rose was still uneasy. “Don't worry about me, I'm all right, that kind of thing, I'll write again soon. Oh—he wants his ration book.”

“His ration book?” Ellen's pure voice sounded as startled as Rose had felt. It was not only the smallness but the practicalness of the request that was so bizarre. But Ellen's voice changed, quickened, almost gladdened. “His ration book!” she said again, no longer startled now but willing herself to be caught up both in the practicality and the littleness of the problem. John was lost, John was suffering, and Ellen could do no more than wonder a little over it. But John needed his ration book, and now Ellen was concerned. “But hasn't he got that?”

“No,” said Rose. “He says his landlady wants it.”

“Of course she does,” said Ellen briskly, clutching at this straw which was saving her from emotion. “She'd probably let him starve without it. We'll have to do something. But I haven't got it. Now let me think. You don't remember seeing it?”

“No. It wasn't with—— No.”

“Mmmm. Then it's at the apartment. Yes, I remember now—or I think I do. But it couldn't be anywhere else. Before I sublet to the Duncans I cleaned everything out of the desk—oh, a lot of things—papers that weren't terribly important but that shouldn't

be thrown away—you know. And I sealed them in manila envelopes and left them on the top shelf of the closet we locked. And that's all right because you have a key, don't you?"

The operator clicked into the conversation briskly. "Will you limit your call to five minutes, please? Others are waiting to talk."

"Oh, is it five minutes already?" asked Ellen. It seemed like half an hour to Rose.

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, we'll be just a moment, operator. We're arranging something quite important, but it won't take half a minute more. *Thank* you. . . . You can get it and send it to him, then, Rose. It must be there."

Yes, thought Rose, I can. Now Ellen has found the way for me to do the practical job of helping John, the job I am—I used to be paid for. But who is going to do the other things for John? Who is going to heal him and help him? Will Ellen? Will she go to him? Will she write and beg him to come to her? How can I bear not to know? Because someone must help him—or must at any rate find out if he wants help. And how can I ask her? "Are you going to see your husband?" Or should I be more subtle and clumsy all at once and say, "Can I give John any message when I write?"

And yet she must speak. The fact that she could think of nothing to say that wasn't clumsy or cruel must not stop her. She and Ellen had hurt each other before in trying to help John—and then the help had been merely negative, to keep him from being persecuted and shamed when he fled. Now perhaps more might be done. He lived somewhere. He was working. This time he had written her coherently about a practical problem and, crippled as the letter was, it was a great deal more than her name on a sheet of blank paper. It might be possible to help him, to reach him now.

"Ellen," she began abruptly, "are you——"

But Ellen was speaking too. The pain in her voice was almost palpable and Rose was grateful, as she listened, that she had been interrupted before she had hurt Ellen any more. For Ellen said, "Where is he, Rose? Where did you say, exactly?"

"*He* doesn't say exactly, Ellen. He says to mail the book to

General Delivery, White River, but that he isn't there, somewhere near, but——"

"Did you look at the postmark?" said Ellen. "Was the letter mailed from White River or from another town? Did he say to mail the book to his real name? You see, Rose, a clever detective could find him in twenty-four hours in a small town. If we just knew where to look."

"A detective——" was all Rose could say.

"Private, of course. Very discreet. It——would be one way to do it. Have you the envelope? What's the postmark?"

"Yes," said Rose, looking straight before her. The envelope lay on the sofa across the room. "Yes, I have it, and it just says White River. He mailed it there, at any rate." The lie gave her the courage really to defy Ellen. "Don't you think," she said, she who had always sworn she would never interfere in the personal life of the man she worked for, "don't you think a detective might——that sending one might be a little hard on John? If he's just getting a start somewhere and——and a detective came around asking about him—— It seems a little cruel——"

"Cruel!" said Ellen, and laughed briefly.

Rose sat still, her head bowed over the telephone mouthpiece. This was a miracle, this instrument that brought Ellen's laugh across four hundred miles to her ear. Yet how could she talk to Ellen this way, or face to face for that matter? To Ellen who had said "detective" and now said "cruel" and laughed. He hurt her very much, Rose thought. But it did not solve the problem. She could not feel the way in which it motivated Ellen. John had hurt Ellen, yes, but just how did that hurt issue forth as this creaking joy in revenge? Ellen had not been like that in April, two months ago when John had gone. Or——had she? Had she been saving not John but her own pride? Deeply uncertain and perturbed, knowing that there was evil for everyone in Ellen's present state, Rose struggled to think, to feel, what to do. What could she say to Ellen that could possibly heal the terrible ulcerous bedsores of marriage that had driven her to revenge and cruelty? What could she say? What could she do? For she knew now that the whole thing lay in her hands. John could not help himself. And Ellen would not. She, Rose, was the only one desiring good and able——perhaps——to act for it.

"What will you say to him," she said slowly to Ellen, "when you find him? What will you do?" She waited, wishing she could think of some better appeal to make.

But it was enough. Ellen was silent. Rose had succeeded thus simply in restoring to her enough foresight to see beyond an action to its result. Ellen did not know what she would say or do. She would try to hurt him. But would she know how?

"Ellen," said Rose, "think about it. You sound tired. Don't do anything for a day or two. I'll take care of this ration book business. Perhaps he'll write again and we can find out more— Wait. Don't rush things."

"That's what everyone says," Ellen said wearily. "Wait. I've waited— Yes, I know, Rose. You're right. I don't want—I— Don't think I don't care about John. I do. It's just—I don't know where I am, or what to do."

"But we will know," said Rose gently. "Now we know where he is and can write, it will all straighten out, don't you see?"

"Yes," said Ellen unbelievably. "Of course. I see that."

"What—what are you doing, Ellen? Are you busy? Are you coming back to Washington soon?"

"Oh, I garden and putter and read—I'm resting. I feel—oh, much better. Much better. I shan't come back to Washington, but I'll move into New York soon if I can find an apartment and take a job. I'll send you my address when I do, of course. Next month, probably. I'll let you know."

"Yes," said Rose, "do that."

"And you?" Ellen said. She was recovering her conditioned reflexes to manners. "How's your new job? Are you enjoying it?"

"Have you completed your call, please?" asked the operator.

"Yes," said Rose. "Yes, it's all right, Ellen. I'm fine. I'll take care of things then—"

But now Ellen did not want to let her go. "I'm sure you'll find the ration book without any trouble," she said. "But let me know. And if—and if you hear any more—"

"Of course. Of course. And, Ellen, you won't—"

"Your five minutes are up, please. Others are waiting—"

"Won't what? Oh—No. Of course not. I didn't mean—"

"Good-by, then. We must talk more often, or write."

"Oh yes, Rose. That's a good—"

But the operator clicked them apart impatiently.

Rose set the receiver down and looked slowly around the room as if she had just returned to it from some long journey to a strange and disturbing country. Small, hot, filled with nondescript department-store furniture, it seemed just then a very pleasant place. Its shabbiness was a refuge, so was its simplicity, so was the fact that Katie would be home soon and that this apartment and Rose's life included companionship.

She thought of Ellen in that big hollow echoing house in Norfolk—for that was how she had always imagined it—and shivered a little. John had hated it, she knew. Ellen's voice said again, "A clever detective could find him in twenty-four hours." Rose got up, went over and picked up the envelope with the postmark that she had not looked at, took out her cigarette lighter, and carefully set it alight, holding the back of the envelope toward her. It undoubtedly had been postmarked White River, she thought, but she would not look and see. She knew where to send a letter, she need not know anything else. She waited until the envelope burned down to black shreds and then she went into the bathroom and flushed them down the toilet.

She went to get the ration book next afternoon. Mrs. Duncan, who had subleased the Gregorys' Washington apartment, let her in. She was wearing a white dotted-swiss apron over her frilly dress, and small tendrils of hair curled about her hot flushed face. She smiled cheerfully at Rose and discussed the heat fervently—it was damp heat, and so much more unpleasant than the dry heat of Kansas where Mrs. Duncan had grown up.

"Yes," said Rose and, "No," and, "It's so kind of you to let me come, I'm sorry to inconvenience you." She felt haunted and deeply uneasy standing in the baking heat of the living room where the furniture had been only slightly rearranged, seeing the changes (potted plants in the window, a cigarette burn on a table, photographs of Mrs. Duncan's relatives) merely as breaks in the overwhelming sameness of the place, little holes in the fabric of life where it had been eaten by the moths of time.

As quickly as she could she went to the closet in the hall which Ellen had locked when she went home to Norfolk. Mrs. Duncan hovered in voracious curiosity to see the inside of this sealed room of her home. Rose felt frantic irritation rise within her. She had

expected to meet unhappiness and fear awaiting her at the closet door as she opened it onto the fossil remains of the Gregoryst's marriage, the bits of bone and metal that could not be disposed of in any other way which Ellen had locked up here and left behind in desperation. I don't—I don't want to see them! she had cried to herself a dozen times that day, imagining the suitcases, the boxes, the envelopes waiting for her in the dark here—not dead, but waiting. She had felt sick at the idea of rummaging through them. But Mrs. Duncan, thank God, was providing relief. Rose was so busy resenting her presence that she clicked the key into the lock and snatched the door open almost without thinking.

Half a dozen big manila envelopes were stacked on a shelf. She reached up for them and at their weight, wadded with papers, she felt her heart sink. Each was neatly bound around with scotch tape. She thought of spilling their contents out onto the floor under Mrs. Duncan's greedy eyes and knew it was out of the question. "Thank you," she said, "I'll take these along. Would it be convenient if I came back tomorrow about this time and put them—what isn't needed—away?"

"Tomorrow?" said Mrs. Duncan in a disappointed tone. "Oh—yes, I guess so. But wouldn't you like to go through them here? Perhaps I could help you. It looks like quite a job."

"I'll stop by tomorrow then. Thank you so much."

"It's nothing, I'm sure," said Mrs. Duncan, sniffing indignantly. "If you're supposed to take them off, take them off. It's none of *my* business. Just make sure that door's locked, now. I don't want anyone thinking *I'm* putting my nose in where it's not wanted."

"It's very kind of you to let me do this at all," said poor Rose. "Thank you again." She fled with her armload of envelopes and, unable to get a cab, bumped home in a streetcar in a mood of stony anger at the world and everything in it. Katie, cool and fresh from a shower, was dressing for a date as Rose came in, and Rose dropped her incubus on the bed without another glance, turned on the radio, and fell into a cool tub.

After a scrappy dinner in the long hot Washington dusk, she went and got the envelopes and sat down with them on the sofa. She did not open them at once. The radio was playing pleasant nondescript music intermixed with commercial announcements. I'm at home, everything's quite ordinary, she thought. I often

listen to the radio. I've heard all these commercials till I'm sick of them. But the thought only increased the strangeness that flowed through the room. Is this usual? Is this ordinary? the nameless music asked. Is this what life really is? A woman alone in an anonymous room, this impersonal voice urging her to buy some absurdity, evening coming, summer and all it means, and she alone and frightened with all the miscellaneous rubbish of the lives of two other people in her lap? She put her hand up to her cheek, but even her own hand did not feel familiar, was invaded with this strangeness and terror. It seemed as if her heart itself dreaded its next necessary beat, and time was only a succession of minutes through each of which she would have to be dragged, protesting and frightened, to the last minute of all, the last compartment of time where she would die alone in solitary confinement.

Oh my God! she cried, and at last, in desperation, opened the first envelope as if escaping from the aura of danger by fleeing to its heart.

The first envelope was full of photographs. Most of them were of relatively famous men who had inscribed them to Gregory. She leafed through them quickly. One, of the Secretary under whom Gregory had worked, had been torn in half. Down at the bottom, last of all, there was a picture of John Gregory himself, an enlargement from a snapshot. It must have been taken eight or ten years before, at some beach. Gregory was running through the fringe of a wave, one arm thrown out to balance himself as he stumbled, and his head turned toward the camera. In the sunlight of that long-dead summer he was laughing. Rose looked at the picture for a long time and then slowly she put it to one side, away from the others. Those she put back in the envelope and dropped on the floor.

The next envelope was all canceled checks. Rose discarded that and went on. The third was letters. Rose looked at them uncomprehendingly for a moment and then realized that they were letters from Timmy to his father. Clipped to a folded paper on top was a note in Ellen's writing, "I have no right to destroy these." She must have burned all the ones to herself, Rose thought, and a pang of realization came over her at what it must have cost Ellen to sort out everything Timmy had sent specifi-

cally to his father. But that was like Ellen. She would not have spared herself. And she would not touch what was not hers. Rose smoothed the soft wad of letters gently. From Belgium, from France, from Army camp, from college, from summer camps, from school—every word Timmy had written to John was here, from the first awkward seven-year-old scrawl.

Ellen saved these, Rose thought; John wouldn't save things like that. Not everything. And knew then that in leaving them behind Ellen had not cared about sparing herself because the letters would not spare John either. No right to destroy them? But it was she who had saved them in the first place. And now she had taken care to see that sometime, somehow, the letters would confront John again, these schoolboy letters read with laughter and pride so long ago. Then each memory of laughter would be pain, each word would be a weapon. A weapon wielded by Ellen against John.

Rose bundled them up in haste. For a terrible moment it seemed to her that they must be destroyed, that if Ellen would spare neither herself nor John, Rose could at least try to. Then reluctantly she thrust the letters back in their envelope. It was true for Rose, at any rate, what Ellen had written. "I have no right to destroy these." And it seemed to her that in keeping them she was the only one of three to handle them—Ellen, John, and herself—who was thinking of the fourth, forgotten, person. Of Timmy himself. This was all Timmy had left. For that reason she had no right to destroy them.

Dear Timmy, she thought, I was fond of him. And then added almost at once, No, that isn't true. She was assuming an intimacy that hadn't existed between them, calling up a kind of useless sentimental pity because the boy was dead. The boy was dead, and therefore it was important to remember the truth about him. The truth was that Rose had thought him a nice enough boy and rather a nuisance. He belonged to Ellen as far as Rose was concerned, and there had been no independent autonomous relationship between them at all. "Dad's secretary—John's boy." That was all they had been to each other. So for this reason particularly, because they had not been close, she owed Timmy respect. She must not destroy the letters.

She put them down and went on and in the next envelope

found the ration book. It fell neatly out, as if it knew she was looking for it, on top of the lease on the apartment, John's driving license, and—Rose glanced at it and refolded it hastily—the official notice of Tim's death. She picked the ration book up thankfully and dumped everything else back in. One paper stuck. She took it out to put in separately and discovered that she was holding Ellen's marriage certificate.

At that fury exploded within her like a bomb. For a moment all present reality was blanketed by the blast—her knowledge of the torment within Ellen, her pity, her anxiety. How dare Ellen ask me to do this! she thought, jumping up. Leave this behind, leave everything around, and not care—not care that I see! As if I were a machine, or a personal maid who could know all the great lady's secrets because she was so unimportant! Ellen's habitual carelessness, Ellen's past friendship for her, Ellen's tolerance, all became insults in that moment, and Rose stood holding the marriage certificate and hating, hating, hating the woman who had married John and gone away and left this behind. I hate her, I hate her, she thought, and it was wonderful to think this. Rose laughed aloud with pleasure.

She heard that laughter and stopped. The radio took over the silence. I must be crazy, Rose thought. What's the matter with me? Ellen didn't think she was insulting me! She—poor soul, she probably didn't think at all! I heard her yesterday. I know what this has done to her. And it's true, it was a terrible thing John did, to go like that. How can I blame her for leaving this behind? And anyway it's none of my business. Clinging to this idiotic assertion, she sealed up the envelopes again, stacked them on the table in the hall to return to the locked closet in the apartment tomorrow, and sat down at the desk to send the ration book off to John.

Easier said than done. Her mood had become one of efficiency, pure and simple. Her anger had frightened her and she was determined now to deny herself any emotional participation in what she was doing. I am John's secretary, she thought with stubborn stupidity, I am simply doing what needs to be done; and refused to realize that she was behaving as Ellen had shocked her by behaving the day before—taking refuge in the small immediate need in order to escape the great urgent demand in John's

letter, the reaching out for human warmth and contact. So I will send the ration book, and just a little note, the simplest kind——

But she couldn't write it. Not an efficient note. Not something to cover an enclosure. And finally, picking up her pen, she wrote with true simplicity and affection. It was not easy, even so. For one thing, she had a panicky feeling that he would not be able to understand anything more complicated than the bare sentences he had been able to put together himself. And yet—to write to him like that would be to make clear, if he *were* capable of understanding it, that she thought him a cripple. If I could just see him and speak to him I'd know in a minute, she thought—and then had to say sharply to the ache in her mind at the thought, But that's absurd. And the knowledge of how absurdly impossible it was drove her to begin.

"Dear John," she wrote, and with the words a quiet resolution came over her and moved the pen for her. "Here is the ration book. I am glad to be able to send it off so soon. I hope you haven't been going too hungry without it.

"It was awfully good to hear from you. Vermont must be a wonderful place to be. Washington is even hotter than usual in June, if that's possible.

"I'm at Surplus now, working for Browning. He's nice, but it's awfully dull and very disorganized. Nothing like the kind of operation *we* ran!"

For a moment her resolution faltered and the pen halted. But she went on almost at once. "Ellen is well. I spoke to her recently in Norfolk——" The pen lifted again from the paper and Rose sat for a moment trying desperately to end that sentence. There was no end. So at last she put a period where she had stopped.

"Write me again, won't you," she finished, "and let me know if I can do anything else for you.

"Sincerely,
"ROSE"

Well, it's done! she thought, and folded this, sealed it with the ration book in an envelope, stamped and addressed it, and ran out down the hall to the mail chute. As the letter dropped, a feeling of accomplishment, almost of elation, came over her. It was done. The letter was on the way. She let the apartment door slam

briskly behind her as she came back into the hall, and made a cheerful face at the stack of envelopes to be returned tomorrow. The idea of facing an indignant and curious Mrs. Duncan was pleasantly stimulating, just annoying enough to be amusing. She went into the living room whistling to the radio music, sat down on the sofa, and reached for a cigarette. On its way to the cigarettes her hand encountered something else. She stopped. But she knew what it was.

She had left out the picture of John.

The music played on. She sat with the picture in her hand, not looking at it, not listening to the radio, simply sitting. Then, slowly, she got up and went into her bedroom. She opened a bureau drawer and carefully, under a pile of scarves, she put the picture away. Then she went back to the living room, took her cigarette, snapped off the lamp, and lay back on the sofa. When Katie came in she found her there, asleep.

CHAPTER 7

That was what Rose did. Ellen was not so lucky.

Since leaving Washington, she had been living in a state of suspended animation. Her family, mercifully, had made very little fuss over her when she came home. She owed that, she supposed, to Jim. He had come down to Washington ostensibly on a business trip and brought her back with him. She had resented his coming and fought against going to Norfolk at first, going "home" as he put it, but once they were on the train she was enormously grateful for his presence. It was then that she felt herself begin to go to pieces. Jim took care of her, but what if she had been alone? She had not let down for a second in the week since John had disappeared, hardly slept. I handled everything, she thought, I really did. Of course Rose helped, but Rose definitely left the decisions for me—Ellen had made them, made them quickly and firmly. Now on the train the week seemed like a nightmare. And yet she had moved through it smoothly, controlling the event.

How did I do it? she thought, and realized that to do it had taken all her strength. She sat in the Pullman looking out at the uninteresting landscape around Philadelphia and knew that she was entirely spent.

Jim suggested they stop over in New York but now Ellen didn't want to. "I want to get home," she said, unconscious that she was using his word, "I'm tired." So they went on. They reached Norfolk in the dark of early evening. The tree toads were piping. "It sounds exactly like the *Sacre du Printemps*," Ellen said. "All we need is a druid or two."

"Wait till you see our current domestics," said Jim. "At least they were current when I left."

"I'll cross my fingers."

"Marion figures they may last till the kids come home from school, no longer. Still, that'll make almost two months."

"Count your blessings."

"Yes'm, I do." The drive ended in a graveled court, and Jim stopped the car and got out as casually as if he'd been driving Ellen home from a cocktail party instead of from the wreck of her marriage to a man he'd always disliked. He took her arm and walked her in, whistling softly as he did. No one was in the hall. The house was still. More than still, Ellen thought. It was listening—listening to her come home. It wasn't particularly interested, but it was a minor satisfaction to have her come back. In a sluggish kind of way the house was saying, "I told you so. Knew it wouldn't work. Well—now you're back." She would have been angry or frightened if it hadn't been for Jim. But he was right there beside her, so solid, so trustworthy. She went along with him into the living room.

Marion was darning socks. She looked up and blinked as they came in. Ellen's mother was playing solitaire.

"Here's Ellen," said Jim.

"Well, dear," said Mrs. Talcott, and her tone was exactly that with which the house had spoken in Ellen's mind. Her jeweled hand—she wore half a dozen rings slipping around her old fingers—moved a black nine onto a red ten and she said, "Welcome home."

"Have you had anything to eat?" asked Marion anxiously.

"Yes, we stopped on the way from the station. We could both use a brandy, though. Does that idiot in the kitchen know where the sniffers are yet?"

"I'll get them——" Marion began. She had finally got the socks off her lap and could stand up.

But Ellen said, "I'm so tired, Jim, that I think I'll go straight upstairs. I want a hot bath. I feel awfully grimy. And then I'm going to get right into bed. How are you feeling, Mother?"

Mrs. Talcott grimaced. "As you see. I'm an old woman."

"Nonsense," said Jim. "I'll bring up your bags, sister dear."

"I've put you in the corner room," Marion said nervously. "I thought you'd be quieter there when the girls come home than in your old one. I hope——"

"Anywhere," said Ellen. Of course I shan't be here when the

girls get home, I shan't be staying that long, she wanted to add, but she was really too tired to argue. There was no point in trying to suppress Marion, anyway. When she realized that she'd said something she shouldn't (and she did realize it every now and then), she simply got nervous and retreated into further blunders. Dear Marion, thought Ellen, and in her fatigue felt that she had arrived at a moment of extraordinary knowledge. Dear Marion, I hate her. And I hate the others too. My mother is full of cruelty, only she is too lazy to do as much harm as she would like to. And my brother—is no good to me. No good to me at all.

The moment ended and she found herself repeating the words without any idea of what they referred to. No good to me? What could she have meant? What was no good? She was too tired to wonder. "Good night," she said. "You're lambs and I love you all. See you in the morning."

She couldn't seem to get really rested. She went to bed before eleven and slept till nine and often took a nap in the afternoon, but all this great sleeping did not rest her or bring her to a place where her will could function again. Awake, she yawned over a book or smiled vaguely through a conversation. People came and went, old friends who were curious and sorry, and Ellen smiled at them and barely managed to answer them when they spoke.

They didn't speak about John, any of her visitors. Ellen didn't think about him either. He came to trouble her only in dreams. And often, not to trouble. Several times she dreamed sweetly of John and woke the next day almost joyful. It occurred to her once that her dreams were much the most active part of her life. She dozed through her waking time and only sleep brought her emotion, activity, and companionship. She found the idea quite amusing, but there was no one to tell it to.

The season grew toward summer. The apple blossoms darkened and fell, the tulips gave way to iris, and the roses budded. Ellen had thought with satisfaction of all the gardening she would do, but it was hard to tell where to begin. She crouched on her heels one morning weeding the strawberry bed that had always been so immaculately kept in the other years she remembered, but in two days you could not even see the beginning she had made. The witch grass and sorrel and clover had rolled back like a green tide. It was almost frightening. The green was irresistible.

It seemed absurd that the gardener had kept it at bay so easily and that Ellen could do nothing, but nothing she did showed. The garden closed up behind her work like water over one's footsteps.

Two boys came to mow the lawn with a power mower and clipped back the shrubbery about the house. The place did not look messy. But any real productivity had disappeared. The fruit trees produced only scabby little apples and pears, the asparagus shot up among ragweed and nettles and went to seed. The perennials bloomed, like a return on last generation's investments, but even with them the law of diminishing returns was setting in. The iris needed to be divided, the roses to be pruned, and the phlox were all turning magenta. As June came, Ellen went into the garden less. It seemed to her that its lack of responsiveness was somehow a symbol and a sign, as if the tide had set against her and everything was drawing away, growing more distant and harder to reach. Never again would the universe drop something unasked in her lap. She had been lucky. Now she wasn't lucky any longer. The smiling inscrutable goddess of fortune had turned her face away. It seemed to Ellen an important divide in her life. Everything felt different now, as the temperature changes and the wind comes up when a cloud covers the sun.

Her mother pried at her marriage. This was difficult. Ellen had not expected it. She had thought her mother's dislike of her marriage had stunted any curiosity about it, and even after she learned to be wary, absent-mindedness would still expose her occasionally to Mrs. Talcott's questions. Mrs. Talcott called John That Man. Since she called President Roosevelt the same thing and since part of the time she professed to believe that John was dead too, an element of confusion entered in, which was further muddied by Ellen's own conviction that Roosevelt had corrupted John. They would talk at cross-purposes, each refusing to understand the other and using the refusal as an extra irritant.

"I don't care, Ellen," Mrs. Talcott began in the middle as usual, "it's careless of you."

Ellen picked up the magazine she had not been reading, wondered how long Marion would be in the kitchen, and said discouragingly, "Yes?"

"You can't just let it go on," Mrs. Talcott said. She was doing

a needle-point cover for a dining-room chair, her fifth in eight years. "Mark my words, it will turn out exactly like *Ethan Frome*."

"It needn't," said Ellen. "I simply shan't coast."

"Coast? What do you mean? I do think it's ungenerous of you to try to confuse me and change the subject in this way. After all, old as I am——"

"I'm not trying——"

"I'm still your mother," Mrs. Talcott finished incontrovertibly. "And you know perfectly well what I'm talking about."

"In *Ethan Frome*," said Ellen, in the voice of a bright student standing before a stupid class, "the climax is reached as the hero and the young girl whom he loves illicitly kill themselves in a coasting accident. By Edith Wharton."

"That woman's reputation amazes me. I always thought her very dull. Very cold and formal. I do like a really warm person. Naturally, I was thinking of it as told by Tennyson. I've not read Mrs. Wharton's books. She treated her husband shockingly."

"You don't mean Enoch Arden, do you, Mother?"

"No, I mean Ethan What's-his-name who was away for seven years and naturally presumed dead, and who turned up so inopportunately——"

"It is Enoch Arden."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Talcott, "I am familiar with an earlier version than was taught you. What I mean——"

"Certainly with a different one," said Ellen. Anything, even making her mother lose her temper, would be better than what was coming now.

But Mrs. Talcott's control could hold almost indefinitely if she wished it to. "Quite likely," she said. "What I started to say was that I must definitely advise you to take steps now to determine just where he went and how it happened. You don't want the question bobbing up in seven years—or sooner, I hope. I can't say that I have ever been an advocate of divorce, though I believe your Mrs. Wharton differed from me, but——"

"She's not——"

"But I think under the present circumstances that some such procedure would be justified. I believe that even the Romanists make certain exceptions. Tell me, do you like this new Pope?"

"I really don't think——"

"It's an odd way to put it, I suppose. An interesting face, but on the whole, I think not. Rather reminiscent of the Inquisition or one of those unfortunate early saints, the one with the arrows, or the gridiron, I should think. You see, dear, if it's done now it's unpleasant, I know, but then the whole thing is out of the way and needn't be reopened later when you will certainly not want to be involved in it. And of course the evidence is right there now. Later——"

"Mother, I don't——"

"So that if, as I think, he proves to have made way with himself—or met with an accident, should I say——"

"Mother, this is perfectly absurd and most—most unpleasant for me! John isn't dead! You've no reason to think so! To assume it, to say it—it's cruel!" Now I have gone too far, thought Ellen, and paused.

Mrs. Talcott drew her lips in and said nothing.

"He was under a great mental strain and he wanted to be alone, right away from everything. I know he has money, I know he's not suffering from amnesia or anything like that, and I'm sure that in time I'll hear from him. When I do——"

"You'll run off to him again, I suppose. At your age!"

"No, I shan't! I shall—I shall consider the situation then, and if it seems best I'll bring divorce proceedings. But I won't—do anything behind his back, I won't start things until he's able to——"

Mrs. Talcott snorted. "You're a fool, Ellen," she said. She put down her needle point and leaned forward. "Has it ever occurred to you that a girl in your position does not usually find it possible to get rid of an undesirable relationship without some kind of settlement being made? This will cost you thousands, Ellen. Thousands! You don't think he'll be content——"

Ellen got up hastily and went out. She walked down the terrace toward the garden. The lilacs needed cutting, she saw. But the scateurs were in the house and she couldn't go back into the house, and her hands were trembling too. It's really incredible, she said to herself, no one would believe that she exists, that she says such things! If I could just see that it's funny, or that she's pathetic, clutching at my life so avidly and wrong-

headedly with her own life over—— But Mrs. Talcott wasn't pathetic. Nor did Ellen dare to laugh. She was afraid that she wouldn't stop.

Way back, when she was first married, she had made John laugh until the tears came with stories of her mother's magnificent confusions. It had been a continued family legend, gone over and repeated and polished and added to for years. It had been dropped slowly as Timmy grew up. His grandmother had adored Timmy and it had not seemed fair—— Even then, once or twice, John had recalled it. Once when Ellen had confused two of his acquaintances he had drawn his eyebrows down into a mock frown and said, "Why, Mrs. Talcott!" and they had laughed again. Though Ellen had been a little annoyed, too, a little hurt. After all, she'd only met the people once and the names were quite similar.

If John were here now, she thought, and I told him this, we would laugh again. Then I could laugh.

But John was nowhere.

She felt herself sliding down toward the abyss of memory. John had left her. Her marriage was over. And in a sense her mother was right, the John she had loved was dead. The man who had gone away was quite different from the John she had married and made a life with. It was all over. The love they had shared was nothing but a scar. Agony, even of this mean kind, could not change the truth. Hopeless, squalid, perverted as her life was, she must not allow it to change her judgment of what had gone before.

There were many circles of hell, she thought slowly. Because one was different from another did not mean that the first had been anything else than part of the Inferno. He betrayed me. I must never forget it. I must never let the memory of the time when I trusted him dim the betrayal.

His love wore out. It grew diffuse and impersonal and spread out over the world. He loved me less as he loved people more. And then a new center formed, another nucleus, and he loved That Man more——

I sound like Mother. She almost laughed then, but the boys with the power mower drove up, and she caught herself. She said "Good morning" and went around the house to another

entrance, found the scateurs and a basket in the garden room, and went out to cut lilacs.

And then for a week Mrs. Talcott would leave her alone and plague Marion instead. She was very clever about this because more detached than with Ellen. A daughter-in-law, after all, was not so close as a daughter. Besides, she had been doing it longer. She used to glance at Ellen—just a quick crackle of the eye—as she scored a point and Ellen, in spite of herself, would be amused even though she came loyally to Marion's defense. At least she did until Marion asked her not to. "She'll just keep it up longer if you do," Marion said. "If you don't answer her she loses interest. I never answer her." Of course this wasn't true because Mrs. Talcott often succeeded in asking the question or making the suggestion that simply could not be allowed to pass. But Ellen dropped out now and let Marion handle it alone. And even that would have been all right if it hadn't been for those conspiratorial glints of eye from Mrs. Talcott.

The girls began to come home from boarding school and college and the servants promptly gave notice. Marion, tight-lipped, took the train to New York and came back amazingly with not only a cook and a butler but an upstairs maid too. She gave old Amelia, Mrs. Talcott's maid, a quite frightening talking-to about antagonizing the new help (and an increase in wages), and the house actually settled down to being run reasonably well. Amelia sulked and Mrs. Talcott talked about extravagance, but only in a halfhearted way. It was strangely seductive to be comfortable again. And in the comfort, Ellen settled down gently, gently, to doing nothing at all.

Summer flowered up like a fountain. The trees were dense with leaves. The world was green and gold and blue and the air was soft as silk. The house was busier now that the girls were home. Daphne, the eldest, was pretty and competent with boys, and her friends sat endlessly on the terrace drinking Coca-Cola and, when Mrs. Talcott was not around, playing a portable victrola. Cynthia, next younger, was rangy and big-boned and a passionate tennis player. She talked very little, but it was easy to see that her thoughts never fell quiet. She thought about tennis with the stern intensity that one imagines General Clausewitz applying to his theories of offensive war. She was angry at all her

family because there was no one about to keep up the Talcott court, and this resentment simmered under everything she said and did. As a result she was home very little, leaving in the morning with rackets under her arm to play all day at the club or a friend's house. When she was home she sat awkwardly about among Daphne's friends, looking too big, looking sullen and powerful and a little mad with her obsession.

After Cynthia there was a gap of five years in age, down to the twins, Delia and Jane, who were eleven. Going away to school too young had given them an insufferable superiority. Any suggestion from their family as to styles of hair, clothes, or table manners met the simple response, "We don't do it that way at Hazlemere." You pushed us out of the nest, they seemed to be saying. Now we shall have nothing more to do with any of you.

Ellen found this very admirable. She liked the twins and would have been glad to help them if they had needed help. They did not. They maintained their wall of self-sufficiency with ease and turned back Ellen's tentative approaches to affection as just another encroachment on their privacy. Cynthia was more grateful to her aunt and sometimes would sit down and pour out a lecture on tennis for an hour or more, confounded with resentment against her mother and father and unconscious jealousy of Daphne. The last Ellen tried to help her handle, but it was impossible. Cynthia would stop talking at once and go off if anyone either argued with her about Daphne or tried to make her understand what her own feelings were. So Ellen let her alone too.

Daphne, oddly enough, would not let Ellen alone. Like old Mrs. Talcott, she pried and pried at Ellen's story. Not with her grandmother's matriarchal abruptness, of course, but obliquely, talking generalities about marriage and watching Ellen under her eyelashes. This was the summer when, with the war ended in Europe and ending in the Pacific, with the men due home but strange now, trained to kill, a great discussion of American women sprang up. Daphne followed it with interest, and *Aspects of American Womanhood* became a staple of conversation at the Talcott table. American women were compared to English, French, Italian, German, and Japanese. The confusion of allies and enemies seemed perfectly natural to Daphne, to whom any

other woman was an enemy. Were American women "too bossy"? Should they be more docile? And how far did docility go? Should one fetch one's husband's slippers? Or should one simply be more cheerful about climbing into bed whenever——

"Daphne, you may leave the table," said her father.

Cynthia was blushing hard at her plate. The twins, inscrutable, chewed on in silence. Marion said, "I really don't know where you can pick up such ideas! And at the table!" She looked acutely miserable, waiting for the coup de grâce from Mrs. Talcott.

It came on schedule. As red as Cynthia, but with rage, not shame, her grandmother pronounced sentence on Daphne. "If she were *my* daughter I would wash her mouth out. With soap."

Shockingly, Daphne giggled. "I'm not seven, you know, Grandmother," she said, put down her napkin, and rose gracefully from the table. "Personally I think a family that won't face facts and discuss realities is absolutely stinky and wrong. I bet Aunt Ellen agrees with me, don't you, Aunt Ellen?"

"Daphne," said Jim, "I won't stand——"

"Certainly I do," said Ellen.

"I knew you would," said Daphne, and fled.

"That child——" Jim began.

"She's no child," said Mrs. Talcott. "She ought to be whipped. Whipped! I don't feel well, Jim. Will you help me inside? And, Marion——ring and get me a glass of port."

"Of course, Mother." She bit her lip furiously and, when Mrs. Talcott had left, cried to Ellen, "How can you encourage her? Really, I'd think you'd try to be more helpful and considerate! Especially since——"

"Especially since what?" asked Ellen grimly.

"Oh—— Never mind," said Marion, deflating. "We've had enough quarreling." She rang the bell for Mrs. Talcott's port, and the diminished family ate dessert gloomily.

Why do I stay here? Ellen thought later, standing at her bedroom window. It's not necessary. I can go anywhere. This is absurd and very bad for me, this bickering. The moon was climbing the sky and its enchantment lingered over the garden. I could go to New York. Or abroad? She grew excited. Perhaps Edna Chase would give me a job on *Vogue*. They can't have many people in Paris and I'm sure I can get a passport. But in the

cold moonlight her excitement died, its sparks were outshone. Twenty-five years ago she had stood like this, looking out over this garden and plotting to get away. Passion to escape had racked her. She had been almost twenty, so young, she thought now — but so old! it had seemed then. She had felt like a princess waiting in her tower for the rescuer who did not come. A prince? A knight in armor? Or just the third son of a woodcutter? But at almost twenty she was beginning to know it wouldn't happen that way. Yet the adolescent dream, almost outworn, had still had power to distort the world with its own chiaroscuro, shadowing this, brightening that, with an unearthly emotion. Ellen left it behind and went out into reality. She was much too sensible to be bound for long by childish despair. But reality had always been a little flat and two-dimensional compared to the dream. Emotions and relations had surprised her. She had found herself thinking again and again, So this is what life is like! John had told her that she was snobbish and narrow. But she wasn't. She was just surprised. The early dream she had accepted of life as a stately dance, each gesture meaningful, had never been erased.

Now, like the opening of such a dance, a figure slipped out of the house, stood listening a moment, and then came softly along the terrace past Ellen's window and into the black shade of the trees at the end. It was a woman in a long dress with a scarf over her head. Lightly, surely, fulfilling the dream, she came through the moonlight into the dark. Ellen hardly wondered who she was. Then a whisper said, "Daphne!"

Daphne, unseen now, laughed softly. "I was afraid you wouldn't wait."

"You knew I'd wait," said the boy.

"I'd have been quicker, but they just wouldn't go to bed. I hope Mother doesn't take it into her head to go in and lecture me again and find me gone. Oh my!"

"What?" The boy was startled.

"Just what'll happen if she does!"

"But what was the matter? I thought it was all right, that our date was all set——"

"Oh, there was a fight at dinner. Honestly! You wouldn't believe it! You'd think I was about seven. Grandmother got furious and stalked out and Mother sent me up to bed after she

made me call you to say I couldn't go to the dance. Honestly, I was terrified you'd think I really couldn't— Shh! What's that?" Daphne stepped out for a moment into the light, looking along the terrace and up at the windows. Ellen held her breath. She didn't want to frighten them, to break into the pattern of the dance. Let Daphne go, let her dare and be happy.

"Is there someone up there?" asked the boy. "Whose window is that?"

"Oh, just my aunt's. She's all right. Her husband left her, you know, and I honestly don't think she knows or cares about anything that happens."

"Gee, that's too bad. She's nice. What happened?"

"Another woman, I suppose. Not that they tell *me* anything, but what else would it be? And then my cousin—her son, you know—Tim Gregory, was killed over in Europe."

"That's tough!"

"Isn't it? Poor old thing, I'm awfully sorry for her. She's all broken up. You wouldn't think my uncle would go off and leave her like that, would you?"

"You sure wouldn't! He must be an awful jerk."

"He is, I guess. Well, it seems pretty quiet. Where did you leave the car?"

"Out on the road. Let's go." And Ellen was left holding a rustle and a laugh and the cruelty of the young. She sank down in a huddle by the window and thought, Shall I cry? But there was nothing to cry with, nothing but emptiness inside her, and around her. She was suspended in a vacuum, entirely desolate, entirely lost. Her familiar life, full of people and events, had receded like the outer rim of the universe, with the speed of light, and now she wandered alone in interstellar space where a cry for help might echo down the centuries and never be heard. I am alone, alone! she thought, and the idea was so terrifying that she shook and her heart pounded in her breast.

She started up. She wanted to run to the door, fling it open, scream down the hall and out into the night, to run through blackness till she was exhausted. The panic terror of the night, the terror of the woods behind the house, could do no more than equal the terror within her, could only balance it. Worn out, half naked, scratched by brambles and branches, she might be able

to drop down at last into sleep and in the morning know that something had changed, that she awoke to something new, even if the new thing were madness.

The house stopped her. It was full of people and relationships as a comb is of honey, and the emotions were too strong for her to walk through untouched. Out of a house where she was alone she might have run wildly into the night. But not here. Not where she had to pass Marion's door and Cynthia's door and her mother's door, where Jim would come out and hold her. She sat down on the bed, trembling violently. I must be crazy, she thought. After a while she lay back on her pillow, and as the moonlight moved across the floor, she slept.

It was two days later that Rose called. Ellen had regained a precarious calm and, coming to the telephone, she thought in a kind of amazement, Why, I don't feel anything at all. Nothing, nothing! She picked up the phone and began, "Rose? How are you?" Summer lay about the house, late afternoon of a long June day, a sleepy locust buzzed in a tree, and the breeze blew softly through the open door. Now I will know, she thought, and, listening to her voice, it seemed to her that all this was familiar, she was sinking into a dream, one of those dreams of John. She tried to catch hold of reality, to remember that here was the answer to her unspoken questions, her deep inarticulate need. But the dream was powerful. Her own little dreams and the great magic dream of her childhood flowed together over the flat facts, and when she snatched at them she cut her hands, hearing Rose's voice horrified and frightened when she said "detective," and tried to be practical. Yes, Rose's voice was sharp and hurting, an irritant. How had Rose come into this? Ellen could not understand. Only at the end, when everything was over and the operator interrupting and Rose saying good-by, did Ellen begin to realize that all this was true. She tried to hold onto Rose's voice, to Rose's companionship, really to find out about John—her John! But the dream had tricked her. Reality came in waves, like surf, and clutch at it as she might, it ran through her fingers. It's no use, she said, and put down the telephone.

Where am I? she thought first, and for a moment the familiar house reeked with strangeness, there was nothing with which she

could feel familiarity, nothing in the world. But she knew this place, of course. Of course. And quickly she placed herself in it. At either end of the central hall doors stood open, to the courtyard on her right, to the terrace on her left. The sun still lay hot on the flags outside, and the patch of sky looking in through the screening was almost as bright as noon. Daytime. Yes, of course. Afternoon, almost time for dinner, Jim home already, she remembered now. He had come to tell her the call was for her. But it was so bright still! Yes, of course, it was June, almost the longest day in the year. It's dazzling, thought Ellen, and put her hand to her forehead. A faint breeze came in. She felt suddenly cooler. Her hair where it waved back from her forehead was wet, and so was the hand that had held the telephone.

John, she thought, John has written. . . .

The sky at the end of the hall was too bright. She felt dizzy. Dizzy from the dazzle. John has written. . . . They were talking on the terrace. They will want to know about this, she thought. What shall I tell them? For a moment she was paralyzed with fright, and then she reached out as if to pick up the telephone again, pretend to be talking still if anyone came after her. But the circuit was disconnected, it was a useless gesture, the most poverty-stricken defense.

The voices went on, soothingly. They were faint because they were all sitting at the end which the trees shaded, but she could still catch an occasional word. They were talking more steadily than when she had been sitting there with them fifteen minutes ago. That was because they wanted her to be sure that they were not thinking of her, were not impatiently waiting for her return to hear what Rose had to say, were not intruding. Jim and Marion, that is. For of course her mother was staring at the door even now, her light eyes in their net of wrinkles fixed as a hawk's are fixed, her lips waiting to say, "Well? Well? What is it now?" Ellen saw the tongue come out from between the faded lips and lick them, saw the mouth twitch impatiently, as clearly as if she were on the terrace herself, lying back in a deck chair, indolent, a magazine slipping off her lap and a Collins in her hand, chilling her fingers as the ice melted. Perhaps I am there, she thought, and it is someone else who has had to come into the house to have a difficult telephone conversation. Perhaps I, too, am waiting

to know what has happened now, and it is someone else who must come out soon to tell us, who is sitting here now trying to think what to say. Trying to know what is true. There must be something very simple to say. I must think about that. But she didn't.

To get the letter, she thought instead, he will have to go to the post office at White River Junction. Someone should go there and wait. Immediately a picture of what the post office would be like came to her—the worn board floor, the rows of mailboxes with their combination locks set in golden oak, the letter drops, the posters still warning of Hitler's spies and not yet entirely superseded by grotesques of Japanese saboteurs, the instructions about V-mail—even the smell. For a moment she was there, waiting. Not impatiently. It seemed to her that the waiting was penance and it was quite understandable, even satisfying, that it might be several days that she should have to stand there. She would not sacrifice an hour of them, not a minute. She would stand by the barred window where people come for the letters addressed to General Delivery, and wait in quiet, in peace. Time would have meaning. It would run again like a river to an end she could understand. Now time was directionless—eddying, drifting, going nowhere. There was no time. And she remembered that sometime time would end. Sometime, the second law of thermodynamics said, matter and energy would be spun out to a thin jelly, even and motionless throughout the universe, incapable of motion because all identical. She was lapped in that motionless jelly. To wait at White River—to feel time pass—The breeze came in again and lifted her hair. Like that, she thought. A breeze in time, a flow.

If I tell Jim he will go himself. With a detective. Jim is practical. He will show the detective a picture of John and it will be the stranger standing in the post office, doing an impersonal job. Jim will wait in a hotel room. The man will reach out and touch John's sleeve and say, "Mr. Gregory?" Or perhaps it will be less polite. "Come on, buddy," and the hand gripping the arm. Will they let him get the letter first?

It will be a letter from Rose, of course. Not from me.

And for some reason it was at this simple thought that she began trembling. Perhaps because she knew, unquestionably, that Rose *was* going to write. Rose was going to dig through the papers

in the envelopes (what in heaven's name did I leave there?), find the ration book, and mail it to John.

But I can go, she repeated to herself. I can get in a car and actually go. How far is it? Less than two hundred miles. Jim would let me have the Ford——

That was absurd. Jim would do nothing of the kind. Jim would send a detective. She would have to slip out tomorrow morning while they were still sleeping and take the Ford. She could leave a note—a note saying John was in New York and she was going to meet him there. Jim had a C card for the Ford. Was it kept in the pocket of the car? In Jim's wallet? She became conscious again that she was shaking. The trouble is, she thought, I sleep so late. Can I get the alarm clock out of the kitchen? Would Marion notice it was gone?

The voices had stopped and someone's chair moved on the flagstones. What shall I tell them! It was not a thought, it was a reflex, a wincing away. But Jim was only saying, "Which is the best station? Can I get New York out here on the portable without an antenna? Or shall I try Hartford?"

"It's the same news," said Marion. "Get Hartford," and there was a click and a buzzing as the radio came on.

Tell them, tell them, what shall I tell them? If I tell Jim he will go, and the detective—— They'll find him in a day. He doesn't know how to hide. I frightened Rose when I said that, but it's true, they could, and then I should know—— But to have him hunted—— John! And at the name a physical memory of love came over her and for a moment faintly but inescapably, she was moved as he had moved her. No, no, she thought, I can't have him hunted, I won't tell. But then will no one find him? Will he disappear again? And she felt him moving away from her, back from the almost-contact. Oh no, it could not be borne! Now she saw again a kaleidoscopic vision of the kitchen clock and the C card and the post office in White River—and knew that none of them was true. She would not do it. She would not go. She was not brave enough. She was not humble enough. He left me, she thought. He wrote to Rose, not to me. How can I run after him? And saying it, knew it was a lie, as well as a mockery of the desperate case she was in, they were in. For in a sense she had always run after him, they would never have been married if she

had not forced the issue. She was responsible. Oh God, she thought, what shall I do? But it was not prayer, it was merely desperation, and the only answer was the reverberation of the thought within her head.

Then, like a star shell lighting up the night, she remembered that she hated him. He had left her, she had thought before. Left her? He had betrayed her, vanished without a word, tortured her with uncertainty, forced her pride to the half-crazy collaboration in lying with Rose which had prevented publicity— And before that— Timmy. Timmy! Timmy dead and John talking on and on and on about other men's sons living, and the old man dead— I hate him, I hate him, she thought, let them find him, let them do what they want— Or why should I worry about him at all? Let him stay in White River, let him rot, let Rose work for him, I shan't do a thing! I never want to hear of him again!

She started to get up, to go out to tell them that it was nothing, routine business about the apartment that the Duncans had sublet. But suddenly she felt dizzy again and then cold, cold all over in the hot late afternoon. No, it was not cold. It was terror. No, it was not terror. It was— But she did not know what it could be called. Slowly, slowly, like a mountain moving, the earth moved under her feet. Something was coming up, coming out. Not around her. Within her. Not earth. Not a mountain growing. More liquid. A geyser. A terrible gale. She was being blown up like a paper bag, like a balloon. All herself was only a surface now, stretching over the tension inside. Stretched tighter and tighter. The pouring up was growing stronger all the time, beating and pulsing. I am stretching. I am being distorted, blown wider, pushed apart.

And she knew and did not dare think that she was going to break. The surface could not stand this. Nothing could stand this. There were pin points of observation left on the surface. What is it? one asked another. No name. It was as much beyond despair as despair is beyond resignation. A drive, a pressure, a tension, straining her out and out, breaking her, annihilating her, now, now, now—and yet always growing worse, the surface holding, racked with holding, but the terror holding against the other, this—this—always the moment of bursting, the voice on

the radio, the light sky, the telephone in front of her on the mahogany table.

And then Marion's figure darkening the patch of sky, Marion's face coming nearer, jumping from expression to expression like one of those rubber masks children play with and distort, and Marion's voice beating up from a whisper to a scream and back again in a sickening rhythm like a pitching ship, like a siren at sea——

She didn't know she struck Marion. She didn't know Jim came in and calmed her enough to be carried upstairs while Marion called the doctor. All she remembered later of the moment of breaking, when even terror could hold no longer against the annihilating pressure, was her mother's face. Old Mrs. Talcott had come as far as the door to the hall, leaning on her ebony cane, and Ellen saw her as Jim picked her up and carried her to the stairs. Mrs. Talcott was intensely interested in what was happening to her daughter.

CHAPTER 8

Then began for Ellen the quiet and the darkened room and the hushed voices, the sedatives at night, the strangeness of familiar things. Things changed size. The pillow was enormous, enormously heavy, the bed was huge and she all humanity stretched out and suffering in it. And then in a wink, in a flick of an eyelash, the pillow, the bed, had shrunk, she was a pin point in space. Even her hands changed size, shrank and grew on her wrists, and her tongue in her mouth was monstrous.

There was a strange woman who was suddenly there. What was she? She washed Ellen's face, her strange, slightly red, slightly hairy hands acquired an obtrusive intimacy with Ellen's body. But she did not do what she was told, she was not a luxurious extension of will devoted to making one comfortable. She had powers, she enforced rules—rules which apparently applied to one, for no one protested, everyone agreed that Ellen was to do as she said; but rules which one had not known existed. Now they were suddenly manifest, striping one's life like the shadow of a barred window. Ellen lay in the dark room and puzzled over the stranger's presence. She wanted to expel her, her hands clenched, her body grew tense with this desire. But all her efforts could not relate this emotion to action. Even when she begged Jim to send the woman away he just said, "There, there."

Of course no one thought to let Rose know that Ellen was—had had a breakdown. If anyone had thought of Rose, it would only have been to determine that she must know nothing of Ellen's illness. This shameful thing must be kept secret, hugged close within the family. The children were hustled off hastily, the twins to camp, Cynthia and Daphne to visit a series of friends, with only a few days at home en route from Nantucket to Mount Desert to Lake Placid. The silhouette of Ellen's graceful languid

figure, dreaming about the house, carrying a cup of tea, a book, a basket of flowers, was metamorphosed into that of the stocky redheaded nurse with her tray and her white shoes. Rather as if the princess had been turned maliciously into a frog. And yet all the time the princess existed. But perhaps she had existed too within the frog, and though she was external now, she was still subject to the frog's will and whims, existing in a dark room, with the summer sun shimmering in unbearable bright lines through the drawn blinds.

In Washington, Rose went on working for Mr. Browning at the Surplus Administration, riding streetcars and busses through the dragging Washington heat, sleeping exhausted at night in the city's exhalations. Weekends, whenever they could, she and Katie would go to stay at a beach or back into the mountains. And there was always the possibility that a miracle would happen, the war would end, and everybody would get a vacation. Her family wrote her hopefully, satirically, begging her to come up and doubting she would. As always, they moved out of Providence in the summer to a big ugly frame house at the shore, which bulged with cousins and aunts and sisters-in-law chasing babies, nursing babies, swelling with more babies to come. The thought of it made Rose violently homesick for the white Rhode Island beaches, the fresh breeze off the water, the casual family—almost tribal—life, with its constant sloppy recurrence of marketing (there was always something forgotten, someone was always having to jump into someone else's car and go to the store for a loaf of bread and two quarts of ice cream), its endless card games in the evening, its conversation and bickering. But the war went on, and as it did, Rose and Mr. Browning, already surveying with appalled unbelief the mountains of surplus goods they were to deal with, found that this was only the beginning. Piling up behind the ranges they could see, if not explore, were inconceivable Himalayas of matériel. Rose dreamt about it sometimes, as the sorcerer's apprentice must have dreamt of the porridge pouring inexorably out of the pot. But poor Mr. Browning did not even dare dream about it.

In Vermont, Gregory was quite happy. His emotions were concerned exclusively with himself—indeed, their strength was still so slight and their range so limited that they *could* not reach out

beyond him to anyone else. Thus the arrival of the ration book so promptly (except for a vague disturbance, a faint malaise, because after all there was a connection now, however tenuous, with the past) was simply satisfactory. He had asked the outer world for something, and the outer world had responded. He gave the ration book to Cap Richards' sister, Mrs. Wood, and left Rose's letter in the jacket of his one suit, which he had worn on the bus trip to White River Junction, and which now went back to its place in the closet with the letter in its pocket. You couldn't say he had read the letter, but you couldn't say he hadn't. He had looked at all the words in it.

And yet the happiness, small and artificial as it was, had healing in it. His days acquired a rhythm which rocked him to sleep at night and woke him pleasantly in the morning to the green world of the tree outside his window, bird song, the long morning light that slanted into his room almost under the tree at an apparently impossible angle. He woke early enough to lie for a while and feel the day grow. It was wonderful suddenly to have time to do this, and now he always seemed to have time. Even at the shop he had time—time to do his job at a steady pace without the frantic sense of pressure that Washington had given him of two hundred things piled up to do that would never possibly get done, and which therefore excused the fact that nothing got done very well. How could anyone do his best when it was a triumph to do anything at all? One's best, indeed, became an absurd conception, related to nothing.

He liked his job now. And if he never thought of personal relationships between himself and other people, he still liked to imagine the things he helped to make going out to the world from him. Valves for marine oil burners, parts for shell noses. They went out and mingled with other products made by other men in other places, his mechanical offspring who met and married their mates and took their places in the world of men.

He and Cap walked comfortably to work through the green mornings along the pavements of the town. When they met anyone, Cap knew his name and said, "Howdy." And he and Cap walked a little more slowly home through the hot afternoons. Although there were two other boarders at Mrs. Wood's who worked at the shop, it was always to Cap that Gregory attached

himself. Without discussion, Cap let him. But it wasn't for a long time—as, finally, his ability awoke to imagine himself in a personal relationship—that Gregory realized how much Cap had given him. Cap's life, Cap's companionship, Cap's ideas, lay open to him like the gardens and house of a friend, where Gregory was free to wander as he wanted. He could come in or pass by. He could sit on the wall and whistle, or he could come up to the hearth. And whether he watched from far off or sat close enough to Cap to hand him his tools as he needed them, Cap was the same. His friend.

He couldn't remember when he had had a friend.

Not in—the city he had left. Not, not there, or before at the university where he'd taught. There'd been men his own age to compete with and men younger than he to strike with admiration, to dazzle, to bind into loyalty. But not a friend. Not even at college. He remembered a lot of crazy laughter, but he'd had to work too hard for his position to be able to take any chances on throwing it away. He'd kept sober at the parties—or more sober than anyone else—and watched the others. He'd had a fight once about that. With—what was his name? Red hair. Crazy Irish. Hanrahan—that was it. "You damn sober yellow-belly," said Hanrahan, "you'll drink tonight or I'll kill you for it."

"Sure," said Gregory, grinning at him. "All you want, Red." He's a little lit already, Gregory thought, he'll forget about it, I'll humor him.

But Hanrahan did not forget, and when Gregory started to leave the saloon he shouted, "Three drinks in two hours, the piker, the yellow-belly, he's scared." His big hand came down on Gregory's shoulder. "Sit down there now, man, and drink your share, or shall I order you weak tea with lemon?"

"No more, thanks, Red," said Gregory, still pleasantly, trying to free himself from Hanrahan's grasp, offering a flicker of the eye in apology to the rest of the table—three or four others he called his friends. "I've got an eight o'clock tomorrow and——"

"Tomorrow indeed. But now it's tonight. Have a drink."

"No, thanks. I——"

"Well, then sit down anyway, yellow-belly. Watch the rest of us get drunk. Maybe you can pick up something useful. Ain't that what you come out for?"

Gregory took a breath and tried to stand straighter, but Hanrahan's hand pulled at him. His eyes went round the table to the faces of his "friends." They were, he saw, yet saw unbelievably, expressionless. Everyone was waiting for what he would say. Hanrahan's accusation sat in one side of the scales. Now he must fill the other side. He had this moment to do it in. Otherwise the beam would tip, Hanrahan's side would begin to go down, the decision would be made.

"Sneak," said Hanrahan. "Spy. Who got Tim Carter fired?"

"You're drunk!" said Gregory. His voice was too high. Fury and fear had driven it up. "I didn't even know Tim Carter. You're——"

"Aah——" said Hanrahan. "Yellow-belly. So I'm drunk, am I? Sure I'm drunk. In vino veritas. Will you stand here and call me names with a voice like a choirboy's that ain't changed yet, or will you come out and fight?"

"You damn fool, you're too drunk to stand up. I won't fight a man who can't——"

"You won't fight? Then you'll take a licking." Hanrahan pulled himself up on the table, leaned forward, and hit Gregory heavily on the chest. "That's for Tim Carter," he said.

Everything changed in front of Gregory's eyes then, narrowed down, came more sharply into focus in a new dimension, the added dimension which deepened the others and slowed down time, that came to him when he fought. He was aware that two waiters had dashed up, someone was pulling him along hastily to the door. He looked back once. Hanrahan was behind him, roaring and weaving between the waiters. They all got outside. It was late fall. Chilly. Three small boys appeared out of nowhere. The waiters let go of Hanrahan, who threw out his chest, breathing deeply, his hands coming up in an absurd drunken parody of boxing. Gregory hit him, cleanly, almost, it seemed, slowly, feeling the agony of emotion in his chest, and feeling the muscle pull that drove his arm start almost just there in that very same spot. Hanrahan went down like a log, his head cracked on the sidewalk, he lay still.

"My God," said someone, "he's cracked his head."

"He was drunk," said another voice solemnly.

Gregory went over and leaned against the street lamp and

vomited in the gutter. "Pee-ew," said one of the little boys, and ran away. Everyone was gathering around Hanrahan now. Nobody spoke to Gregory. They were debating what to do with the supine and heavily breathing body on the sidewalk. "Take him to the Delta house. No, that won't do, take him to Jonesy's." "Maybe he's really hurt, take him to the Infirm."

Then Hanrahan, the epic, unkillable Irishman, slowly opened his eyes, blinked twice at the faces above him as the voices died into silence, and said at last, "Did that— knock me down?"

"You were drunk, Red," said someone loyally.

"I didn't want to fight him," said Gregory bitterly, but it didn't make any difference, everyone was explaining that Hanrahan had been drunk and this was no excuse for Gregory, it defined his offense (a bully for hitting the drunk man, a coward if he had not), and he went home alone while Hanrahan was borne off a hero.

And yet nothing much had come of it, it hadn't hurt his college career, he couldn't remember that there'd been any prolonged anger between them. He wasn't sure how it had ended. Hanrahan had not apologized, yet he'd managed with that Irish ease, that balm of laughter, to belittle it and turn it into a joke, a caricature of the hatred Gregory had really felt, so that everyone had forgotten in a week or so both what had really happened and what they thought had happened. And when they graduated, Gregory and Hanrahan had sat together drinking beer, with the conversation growing more and more tragic between them over their parting. Gregory had tried to tell himself it was true, he would really miss Red's spontaneity (and of course it was true, he did miss Red, he'd been amused and glad to see Hanrahan when he turned up in Washington, even though he was lobbying for a power company). But he couldn't feel it. Somewhere there was a block. The emotion he told himself about was the right, the true emotion which must be burgeoning somewhere in his breast. But he didn't feel it.

The pattern had been set before that, then. And yet—he knew that there had been a time when it had been different. He could feel the memory move within him, as a woman, he thought, must feel a child move in the womb—an unknown memory like the child, he could not reach it, it had not yet been born, but it was

there. There had been a time once when there had been warmth and companionship, when part of the world had been paneled and cushioned and tufted with intimacy and he had had a friend. A long time ago. A time he had had to forget.

And he sighed, rolled over, and got out of bed, but not unhappily. Cap would be waiting for him. He had not remembered, but it was there. He did not even tell himself he would remember soon. He did not need to. The hidden memory was warming him already.

It was on a Sunday that he remembered. Cap had taken him fishing. It was not the first time. Like all his days in that heavenly healing summer, this day had a brother in a series of Sundays, it was part of an always. As always, they drove to the lake in Cap's old Plymouth with the back seat full of his gear. Jason Bowles, who rented boats, kept Cap's canoe in his shed, and they got it out together, stowed their truck and their lunch in it, and paddled slowly off. They took a few bass, but the fish, Gregory thought, were the least of it. It was the summer day, the long afternoon, the sharp little waves on the lake and the lake smell, the white pebble beaches breaking the green here and there, the color and depth of the water which darkened and liquefied the sky, these were his real catch. Drifting quietly in a cove, holding the canoe steady while Cap cast, he enjoyed a kind of unthinking paradisaical happiness. Purely physical, it held him enchanted as no intellectual pleasure could. Deeper and deeper he could feel it reach within him, and tension and fear went out of him bit by bit, knot by knot. And yet he was not purely passive, not merely massaged by contentment. There was an active joy in handling the canoe, in the little wind on his cheek, in his muscles answering the drag of the craft and holding the paddle steady. The two things were part of each other. He had to use his body in order to enjoy it.

Cap swore suddenly, shook his hand as if he intended it to fly off his wrist, and then held it out toward Gregory. He had run a hook into it. "Haven't done that since I was eleven," he said in a voice weak with astonishment.

The world turned upside down for Gregory. Cap's hands, Cap's miraculous hands, had hurt each other. Cap was asking him for help, the bloody hand with the incongruous metal clinging to it

was an appeal. His own hands took over from his brain. He drove the canoe farther into the cove where the wind could not reach it, laid his paddle down, and slid forward, feeling for his jackknife. He took Cap's brown hand streaked with surprising red in his. The hook was in the fleshy pad under the thumb. Cap jammed his knees together on either side of his wrist and sat still, muttering to himself. The muscles jumped in his shoulder and in the line of his jaw, but his hand was still.

"Damn the blood," said Gregory, "I can't see." The words reminded him for an instant that blood used to make him sick, and then it became merely a distraction again, a nuisance which flooded over the torn flesh as he probed for the embedded barb.

Then suddenly it was out. He held the hook in his hand, and Cap groaned, relaxing. His bloody hand fell to the floor of the canoe and he put his head down between his knees. Gregory looked curiously at the hook. Then, in a movement of instinctive revulsion, he threw it overboard.

At the same moment Cap's head came up. "What'd you do that for?" he asked. "'S nothing wrong with the hook."

But Gregory was leaning over to wash off, almost with desperation, the slimy, sticky blood. His hands pulled at one another as if he could hardly believe in the possibility of cleansing. This was his friend's blood on his hands; even if it had been to save, to heal, he had dug in his friend's flesh with his knife blade. He scrubbed his hands long after the lake water had cleaned them, and he still held them a little awkwardly as he slid back to his seat and reached for the paddle.

Cap was contemplating his hand thoughtfully. "Don't know how I come to do that," he said.

"I'll take you back," said Gregory.

"Guess so," said Cap. "Not but what it'll bleed itself clean all right, but I can't handle rod nor paddle no more today. Funny. Don't know how I done it." He shook his head, shaking off the worry, and settled down comfortably, like an old dog, amid the clutter and the fish scales in the bottom of the canoe.

It was three miles or so that Gregory had to paddle alone back to the landing, and before he was halfway there the muscles had begun to drag in shoulder and forearm. He shifted sides and his left arm tired more quickly. He was frightened. The accident to

Cap, the something going wrong today, seemed to hang over him. This was his refuge! But things went wrong here too. He paused for a moment, lifting his head, taking the wind in his face.

And the world turned again. Something went wrong, said the wind, but you put it right. Cap was hurt and you helped him. The ache, the weariness, flowed away. He sat in the middle of the lake, and it was as if his eyes were opened on a new world. Earlier, he had been physically happy, peaceful, and rested. This was different. He was, for a moment, transported beyond time into a world where all delight was eternal, where experience was a treasure that would not fade. Accident had struck and his strength had defeated it. Power flowed from within him out into the day, joy in the day flowed back to him, for a moment there was almost no barrier between them, no surface cutting him off from the sunlight and the wind, from all other experience. Then he felt himself again, he was contained once more, but he knew he had reached something, some essence, felt something that he would never forget. He would never forget this afternoon. It would lie always ready to memory, and every other afternoon in summer when he was happy would be marked with it, flavored from now on with this special joy.

He looked about as if trying to find some landmark by which to identify and recall his emotion. The lake water was blue, the sky was high, the trees were three colors of green. The afternoon light lay still, hardly changing as four o'clock drew on toward five. He knew that these things were irrelevant to his emotion, and yet he noted them. They were talismans. When he saw such light, such lake water, he would remember that he had felt this, though what it was he had felt he did not know.

I am alive, he thought.

"You look like an Indian," said Cap. He had wrapped a handkerchief around his hand and lighted a cigarette.

"My great-grandmother was Indian," said Gregory. And remembered.

"That so?" said Cap. "You've got the look. Great-grandmother, hey? That must have been a hundred years ago."

"More." Gregory heard his voice—steady, warm, sure of what it was saying. He could no more have told what was coming next than he could have picked up the canoe and flown home with it.

"My great-grandfather was wounded in the War of 1812, and the government gave him a parcel of land out in what was Indian country then. Illinois, Michigan, I forget just where. About ten years after the war, I guess, when things weren't so good in Ilion—that's where he came from, Ilion, New York—he went out there. That's when he picked up my great-grandmother. He sold out the land later, just before he could have got a good price, when the country was just beginning to fill up. Guess he was kind of feckless. He changed my great-grandmother's name to Samantha when he brought her back to Ilion. I don't know what it had been. That's where my grandfather was born in 1836. He told me about it, my grandfather. But he couldn't remember her much. She died when he was seven. He—was a fine man, my grandfather——" He heard his voice stop.

He was my friend, said his mind. He was the warmth in my world. This is what I had and lost and have forgotten. The quiet old man in the corner of the porch swing with his hands folded on his cane as he talked to me. The cane reaching out every now and then and rubbing the flank of the dog that dozed at his feet. And his voice going on levelly and surely so that I always expect Truth to talk with his tone in his slow quiet voice. I had forgotten my grandfather!

"Now all this land, Johnny," the quiet voice said, "was nothing but trees then, and one road maybe. It was all wild and the real road was the river. You'd barge down the river, you'd raft down the river——" Then a door banged. The voice faded.

The picture changed. His grandfather's hands whittling on something. He was sitting on the back stoop. The sun glinted on the knife blade. "And how many days did we sit in front of Vicksburg looking up at them guns? And every day a year. And the guns reaching out and looking for us. And then one night, General Blair, he——"

Bits and pieces, scraps of memory. But suddenly he knew why the voice faded in his mind. A woman was standing above the old man, her arm thrown out carrying something clumsy—it was a clothesbasket full of laundry. Her voice was pure hate. "I told you not to tell the boy those stories. Johnny, go in." And she stood waiting till the boy, Johnny, went up the stairs past her and into the house.

The old man didn't say anything. Perhaps he'd said it all before. Perhaps he knew it would make no difference. But the woman said shrilly as the boy closed the screen door behind him, "He dreams. Nightmares——" as if she had to justify herself, furiously, to the old man's silence. The old man didn't even look at her. He stared impassively at the piece of wood his knife blade was carving. The woman's breath shook in her nostrils and she cried, "Look at that mess! Look at those shavings! And I just swept there!" And the old man put his knife away and got up and went off.

That was my mother, Gregory told himself. It wasn't necessary. He knew it by the taste in his mouth. The taste of terror and rage and heartbreak. His mother.

He put his hand up to his forehead. It was July 1945, and he was in the middle of a lake in Vermont with a friend of his, a man who'd torn his hand on a fishhook and whom he was responsible to deliver home. The memories drew back, the voices were gone. He was paddling Cap home. He dug at the water, his shoulder ached a bit, he could see Jason's boathouse now. I will remember the rest later, he thought. And then he thought, I will never forget my grandfather again.

He got Cap home all right, though it was the first time he had driven a car since—since the time before it happened. He managed well enough. Mrs. Wood groaned over Cap's hand and poured iodine on the wound, and Cap yelled, and swore she'd crippled him. Gregory sat on the kitchen table and kidded Cap for being clumsy. Cap swore and gritted his teeth and said Greg was a goddamn Choctaw. Mrs. Wood said she wouldn't put up with such language in her kitchen. Cap said he needed a drink, for medicinal purposes, and Mrs. Wood said that, medicine or no medicine, she wasn't going to stand for whisky drinking in her kitch—— And Cap said, "All right, all right, all right! Come on, Greg," and hoisted himself out of his chair.

"You come back here," said Mrs. Wood, "and let me tie that thing up."

"That thing's my hand," said Cap, "and I wouldn't no more let you touch it again—— Iodine! You've crippled me."

"You can't go round with it—— All right, go ahead! Let it infect! All the Richardses always were stubborn as mules."

"You was born one," said Cap, and roared with laughter.

Gregory got off the table and said, "I'll bandage it, Mrs. Wood. You shouldn't cover it till the iodine's all dry, anyway, or it'll burn. Where's the bandage?"

"There now," said Mrs. Wood, producing it from behind a box of baking powder, "you've got a good friend, Cap Richards, and I wish you had his sense. Thank you, Mr. Gregory, I'm grateful to you for looking after him, even if he can't do no more than to take the name of the Lord in vain, and call you a heathen Indian."

"He's one-eighth heathen Indian," said Cap, "he told me so himself. Come on, Sitting Bull, I need some firewater." He took Gregory's arm with his good hand and walked him out of the kitchen, letting the door slam on Mrs. Wood's voice upraised on the evils of drinking.

Cap's room was a big one on the second floor. He had a workbench fitted into the bay window looking over the yard, and from one of the boxes under it he produced a bottle of irish whisky. "I have to keep moving this around," he said. "She finds one on me every now and then. You know what she did last time? She poured it down the drain—more'n half a bottle of bourbon, it was—and put Listerine in instead, colored up to make it look right. What do you think of that? I got a mouthful before I smelled it—I swear to God I near took off that night. Would've if I hadn't got my tools all fixed so good here." He poured the toothbrush glass on the bureau half full and gave it to Gregory, raised the bottle, and said, "Luck."

It was good whisky, pure and hot, with no raw sweetness in it. "Christ, that's good," said Gregory. "I haven't tasted irish for——" His voice stopped. Then he finished slowly, "for a long time."

Cap was examining the tear in his hand. He picked up the bottle and took another drink and squinted at his hand again. "What happened to you, Greg?" he asked.

Gregory sat still. The whisky and the afternoon and two months of healing had loosened the tension within him. He wasn't frightened, staring out the window past the handles of Cap's chisels arranged neatly in holes at the back of the workbench. He didn't resent Cap's question. He was silent because

he didn't know what to say. He put his forehead down on one hand and looked at the bend of his elbow where the blue shirt wrinkled, and tried to think what had happened to him, and found that no thinking would focus.

"I had some trouble," he said, and swallowed the rest of the whisky.

"Well," said Cap mildly, "we all do that." He blew on the tear in his hand and grimaced and said, "Want to lace me up?"

Gregory picked up the roll of bandage and wound it slowly and carefully around the wound, tore its end, ripped it back, and tied it neatly around Cap's wrist.

"God damn it," said Cap, surveying it, "if I'd just done that tomorrow or yesterday at the plant I'd of got compensation. Have another drink?"

"No, thanks," said Gregory. "I'm tired." He was, suddenly. And the whisky was making him sleepy. He hadn't had liquor for—— "I'm going to catch a nap."

"Nearly suppertime."

"Tell her I don't want any. I'm awfully tired."

"Paddling home alone," said Cap. "That's why. Well—thanks."

"No," said Gregory, "thank you." He had to put his hand on the doorjamb going out, and the stairs to the next floor seemed endless. The minute he reached the haven of his room he locked the door and lay down heavily on his bed. For once he let his shoes mark Mrs. Wood's spread. He thought about taking them off, but the sleep within him was too urgent to argue with and he let himself go into it as he might have walked from a beach into the sea.

He waked late, in darkness. The house was still and he knew that midnight must have struck and the early characterless hours of the next day were creaking by. It was wrong to be waking at this time when everyone slept. All defenses of companionship and society were down and each man lay alone in his bed, protected only by the blanket of his sleep. Rip that off and he would be as vulnerable as a fieldmouse running across a road under the shadow of a hawk. Hawk-shadow swooped. Fieldmouse-mind dodged, but the talons were inexorable and swift.

She sent my grandfather away. She said he was a dirty old

man and she couldn't have him around the house. He whittled and he spat and he had little collections of treasures wrapped in grayish cotton wool and kept in broken-sided boxes. Who had to wash his socks and his underwear, now that there wasn't money for a woman to come in? She did. But it wasn't just that. It was the boy. The boy was with him all the time. How did she know what he told him? But the boy cried out in his sleep nights, and ground his teeth. And she was afraid he'd run away. She'd heard the old man tell him something once beginning, "Now, when you go West——" And the boy nodded and listened as if that necessity to roam and wander, work with his hands, throw up a job whenever he felt like it, were already alive within him and accepted between them. She would not have it, she cried, panting, terrible with hate, convulsed with bitterness. He would have to go.

The boy's father bent his head until all she could see was the pink top of his skull with the long hairs combed across it. He would not look at her. The money he could not give her was his defeat.

Her voice rose with a new edge now that she knew she was winning (though she had always known she would. But to see it, to smell his fear!). She would make him wallow in weakness and impotence. It was bad enough, she cried, that the boy had failure for a father, that she was married to it, but the old man was evil, he was corruption and indifference. Half savage, bred on the Indian girl, all the heathen wildness there, worse for its mask of Christian civilization! Not for a day, not for a minute, would she have him there longer to poison the boy, awake the savage inheritance in him, teach her flesh and blood to leave her——

There was a Soldiers' Home twenty miles away, and the old man was going there. Now. Today.

He went, too. There was nothing the boy or the father could do to stop it, and the old man did not try. He could not go at once, though, and that made it worse. It took a week to arrange things, he had to give them all his papers, the papers that had been one of his treasures, from that old war when he was young and the Army of the Tennessee could have marched and fought its way clear round the globe. Now the papers were his passport to Limbo.

It was a sunny hot afternoon when he went. They'd had to hire a rig to get him and all his belongings out of the house to the station. The father piled the worn grips—even an old carpet-bag—and the badly wrapped bundles and parcels in the carriage. The old man came out of the house slowly and stood at the top of the stoop, looking out across the street (“all wild once, the only road the river”), and the boy, standing next to him, looking up at him in terror, thought he must have been seeing it as it had been then. His mother was not there. She was inside. But everyone could feel her eyes watching from behind the curtains in the parlor, observant and unforgiving.

The old man had a little parcel in his hand. He said, “Here, Johnny. That’s for you.”

The boy opened his mouth but he couldn’t say anything. He took the package and held it in one sweaty, dirty hand.

The man by the carriage straightened himself and said, “All ready, Father.”

The old man went down the steps, letting himself down carefully with his cane one step at a time. The boy’s father came up and tried to take his arm, but the old man ignored him, his straight black stare going past his son’s shoulder. Only when he got to the carriage did he accept the grip on his arm, and then he was an old, old man to whom nothing mattered very much, being helped in for a journey to anywhere or nowhere. The driver shook the reins, the horse moved off. The carriage went slowly down the street through the hot sun and the inadequate shade of the scrubby trees, all that grew now where the forest had once stood.

Then the screen door creaked. “What did he give you?” cried the woman’s voice behind him. “What’s that package? Give it to me!”

The fright in the boy’s face turning toward her should have stopped her, but she reached out and snatched for the parcel. He held onto it. He could not fight her, he did not dare hate her (how could you hate your mother?), but he could cling to the little package. Her nails ripped the skin on the back of his hand. He screamed—very briefly, for he remembered the neighbors in the close little houses—and reached for it again; she threw it passionately, with wild feminine aim, and he saw it soar off, hit

the branch of an old lilac bush, and drop into the thicket at its foot. He gasped, whirled to go after it. But she had him by the shoulder (hawk talons implacable and swift). She hit him across the face. He gasped and felt heavy blood begin to run from his nose. Then he was only crying, snuffling, gasping as the blood ran, shaking and sobbing.

"Go in," she said. Her voice was as heavy as iron. "Go in and—go and wash your face." She let him go, shaking now herself. He could have run down the steps then and snatched his gift from the weedy thicket where it had fallen, but he turned and went in. The blood ran down his chin and spotted the thin carpet on the stairs. He shut the door of his room and huddled in a corner, crying. Not for grief. For shame.

He had never cried in grief. There had always been shame there too. He had never got far enough away from his shameful self to mourn. For the old man. For Timmy.

He never knew what his grandfather had given him. The next night, when he hunted there, where it had fallen, he knew even before he started that his mother had been ahead of him and that there was nothing left to find. His father took him to the Soldiers' Home once, but the old man had retired into himself and did not speak. He sat hunched on the veranda with a blanket around his shoulders in the bright October sunlight. The boy's father talked, hopelessly retailing news of people the old man did not remember. The blank black stare crossed the veranda rail, went on and on. It seemed to focus nowhere, as if all the old man wanted to see, to know, was light from darkness.

What had it been, his grandfather's gift? A flint arrowhead? The silver medal some forgotten general pinned on him once? A chunk of rough turquoise from New Mexico? The faded daguerreotype of the Indian woman? Any of these, or none. He had forgotten to wonder, he had shoveled the memory under, with small-boy activity he had covered his shame. Now in this darkness he wished suddenly, bitterly, that he knew.

A cock crowed. The window was faint with light. He shifted on the bed, remembered he'd been sleeping in his clothes. He sat up wearily, clumsy with sleep, to unlace his shoes. Then he lay back on his pillow, watching the window. Light would grow now.

Sleep came back slowly, in a long gentle surge. Just before it took him he thought, Perhaps it is best not to know what it was, for this way he has given me the possibility of everything. The important thing was the gift. Whatever he gave me was the symbol of everything. "Here, Johnny, that's for you." It was his life and all he knew and had tried to tell me that he put in my hand.

Then Gregory slept.

CHAPTER 9

And woke to joy. Fleeing back through horror, he had come to a stopping place. His grandfather's gift was the talisman of the past and the past had meaning. That old, old life fitted onto this new one. The pieces were beginning to come together into continuity. The skill of his hands, which he had thrown away, was found again, and in the resting place which his hands had made his mind, too, going back, had found a new beginning. This town where he had found a job and a friend was very like the town he had grown up in. It had been a town settled from New England by people like these. It was a little more bourgeois and a little less crabbed, his home town, and the climate was different, warmer and wetter, but it was within hailing distance of this place, and the language was the same even if the accent was different.

A kind of physical recognition opened him out to people. Instead of sitting silently by Cap as they ate their sandwiches in the yard of the plant or their meals at the boardinghouse, he began to talk to people. It was not important talk as he had come to think of talk being important—that is, the words could affect no one. For years he had thought of words as instruments of power over other people. It had been his mission to change men's minds, or to hold men's minds steady to what had been decided to be proper beliefs. There had been no other realm of ideas but ideas-in-action. Now in this little town in northern New England, industrially so unimportant, statistically so negligible, talking to these men who were so completely "the little people, the common men," he began to discover that words were something more than weapons. He came upon the idea of ideas. For words that could affect no one else were words which affected him. He had weighed words for power. Now he weighed them for truth.

Small truths, perhaps, unimportant truths. The weather as it

concerned Mrs. Wood's victory garden, for instance. (But out of the garden Mrs. Wood fed her boarders and put up vegetables for the winter. All Mrs. Wood's primitive profit-and-loss system was bound up with the bounty that her half acre of beans and tomatoes and cabbage and carrots produced.) Three hours overtime at the plant meant weighing the dollars gained against the Saturday afternoon lost, and the work was done, but with a proper sense of what it involved. Mr. Peters' secretary, Jeanie Hughes, announced her engagement and a gentle ribaldry full of old men's winks and half jokes warmed her passage through the shop.

At the end of July, Mr. Peters put Gregory on a radial drill and his pay went to fifty dollars a week, with overtime. Of course the withholding tax and social security came out of that, and enough to buy an E bond a month, but after he'd paid Mrs. Wood the thirteen dollars a week his room and board cost, Gregory found he had a couple of hundred dollars saved. Cap nagged him until he put it in the savings bank—he hadn't wanted to.

"You darn fool," said Cap. "There's no one here would take it off you, but you're just as likely as not to drop it outa your pants pocket into the middle of the lake someday when you're pullin' in a bass."

"I don't like carrying the bankbook around," said Gregory. "Afraid I'll lose it."

"For the love of Pete, you carry the money around! If you lose the book, the bank'll give you a new one. Leave it home in your bureau drawer, if you're worried. Or give it to my sister to look after. She's never lost anything in fifty-three years—or at least since she got married!" And Cap winked and shook with silent laughter.

"I——" Gregory began, and then swallowed whatever the objection might have been. "All right," he said meekly.

And July wore on into August. Cap's hand healed. Gregory went with him to a Grange dance one night and revolved solemnly about the hall with Mrs. Wood in his arms. It was a surprising gathering. Some of the dancers were over seventy, and Mrs. Therese Rabineau had brought her five-month-old twins, who slept happily in a corner on four chairs pushed together.

The band played for square sets as well as popular tunes and the leader called the figures. Mrs. Wood got Gregory into a set and he fought and perspired his way through it, ending as exhausted as he'd ever been after fast tennis, but Mrs. Wood merely patted her face gently with her handkerchief without turning a hair and went on to dance another set with an enormous hoary old man who was the postmaster.

They drove home slowly under a huge sky peppered with stars. Mrs. Wood went to bed, but Cap and Gregory took some beer that Mrs. Wood gave grudging icebox space to and sat on the steps drinking it and talking quietly. An out-of-season firefly blinked once or twice and everywhere there was peace.

"Think the war'll be over soon, Greg?" Cap asked out of the darkness.

Gregory dropped his cigarette butt on the ground and stepped on it. "I don't know," he said.

"When we go into Japan," said Cap, "the Russkis will roll them up in Manchuria. It's just time now, I guess. But it's awful hard time to wait." He sighed. "Never knew I was so old till I came to find waiting so slow. One year, and another year—I don't want to see another war."

"Who does?" said Gregory.

"I know. Nobody. And yet, we get 'em—and we fight 'em—— Now why?"

"Because people don't know what they're doing." Gregory spoke with suppressed violence. "Cap," he said, "if you'd had a job in the government and you'd helped run the war and you'd had a son who went and got killed—what would you think? Would it be your fault?"

The stars gleamed in the sky, the firefly blinked its light. "Some, I guess," said Cap. "I'd think it was some my fault. But not much more yours than mine."

"Perhaps I could have kept him out. Out of the fighting, anyway."

"Did he ask you to?"

"No, of course not. But he didn't know—and I didn't know. What it was like."

"If you'd kept him out, it would have been another man instead of him was killed. We're all responsible and none of us knew."

You can't blame yourself for him more than for all of 'em."

"For all of them," said Gregory. It was a terrifying idea. But the terror lifted him as if on the crest of a wave until he could see farther than, it seemed to him, he had ever seen before. Sustained there, he had a vision, inarticulate and inchoate, yet so wide as to shiver his brain with an illusion of omniscience, a vision of all their bodies lying across the world, undone by death, grotesque and tormented, thrown into final brotherhood and identity only by the peace of God which disqualified them for the world's peace. Ten hundred billion times since the world began a man had died, making by default the last gesture, the only gesture, toward the community of mankind, and the gesture had never been understood. Now it was even ignored. Who pondered death now, who pondered meaning and the great soaring void where Timmy's soul—who knew?—might wander? After they were dead now, no one cared. It was only the moments up to death, the mechanical months of making war, that counted. It seemed to Gregory, riding his moment of knowledge, as if such months were the husk of wheat which could be valued only by mania, as if the kernel itself were everywhere thrown away. The kernel was death, but it was life, too, and the whole bass undermelody, the deep chords of the music, were not played if death were nothing but the click of a bullet and the end of activity. Fright and arrogance named it this, but fright and arrogance were at the last unavailing, for our bodies, Gregory saw, achieve humility in the end despite our minds. All over the world lay these humble broken bodies, the last sowing, and the fields above them waited humbly, too, for the upward penetration of what might grow from them. Green winter wheat, or the sons of the dragon.

"I couldn't have done anything," said Gregory, "because I didn't even know what was happening. I guess I knew less than you. It wasn't just that I was so close I couldn't see. It was that I didn't know how to look. Do you think we were wrong to fight, Cap? At the end we couldn't help it. But——"

"No, I think we were right. But I guess we threw away chances when it wouldn't have been so tough, maybe we threw away chances that it wouldn't happen at all. Did you know the President?"

As he spoke, Gregory remembered momentarily that shattering day when Roosevelt had died. But those emotions had been only emotions. His answer to Cap was the simple truth! And what a relief to deal only in truth.

"Yes. Some."

"What did he think? How far back do you think he knew it was going to happen?"

"You know, Cap, I don't know. It wasn't that he was secretive. You always had the feeling that he'd talk to you about anything—talk about it generally, of course. I don't mean that he ever let out anything he didn't want you to know. But—the things he knew, he knew by feel. He wasn't simple. He was pretty complicated. But he had simplicity, if you see what I mean. The complicated part was his thinking, and that's what he talked with, what he talked from. Underneath, where he felt, he didn't talk about. And that's where his actions came from. It's like listening to a man play the piano by ear. How much does he know about music? How far ahead does he know what the melody's going to do? You can't tell. Probably he can't tell you. Maybe if he'd read the music and told us about it, if he'd put his thinking and feeling together more—maybe we'd have been better off. I suppose so."

"And maybe we wouldn't have known what he was talking about. You can't leave it up to one man—we all need more sense, I guess. I'm sorry about your boy."

"Yes."

"Want some more beer?"

"No, thanks. I'm for bed." Gregory stood up and stretched. "Tomorrow's Sunday. Do we go to the lake?"

"Yeah. Tony wants to come."

"Fine." He bent to pick up the beer bottles, took one last look at the night. Peace and the soft air and the fragrance of summer, and somewhere out in the dark across the world Timmy's body wrapped in the great soft blackness of death. Lower than he could hear, the deep bass vibration touched him for a moment and he straightened his shoulders as if what he owed both it and himself was to meet it with dignity. My son is dead, he thought. Many died. I am not alone. Nor is he. Then very gently

the chord grew silent and he went in through the light of the hall and up the familiar stairs to commonplace sleep.

And summer was golden and healing and eternal. His hands, working, made not just metal pieces and parts of machines and weapons, but a unity of work; the idea of creation and construction as constructed and created by hands, from materials. Echoes of words from the talk of his friends rang in his head and he listened and wondered and learned the possibility of judgment. To himself he still seemed to live apart, but it was a known and accepted apartness, adjacent to the life of the town and the shop and Mrs. Wood's boardinghouse. And no one else seemed to feel the barrier of his separateness. So he came back slowly to life and humanity, back from the stopping place and the mere cessation of flight.

Then the war ended.

All day, after they heard about the bomb, Gregory went about his business shaking inside. He didn't know why. He sat beside the radio in Mrs. Wood's back parlor, his clasped hands thrust down between his knees and his head bent over them, and listened to the words out of the machine. It was not so much a trembling as a reverberation to them that he felt. Something inside was tuned to this wave length and responded, although his mind could not itself measure out and interpret the dots and dashes of his emotion. It was not shock he felt, or fear, or guilt; he rejected all those names for his feeling. The only one that he could not discard at once was awe. And he did not know what that meant. The thing had been made by men, hadn't it? He realized that he had even known something about the making of it—known at least that there were forbidden areas where Something was being made. But awe was the one word he could not absolutely rule out. His thought found simple words: "Something has happened, is happening, will happen." Men had made it, but they would neither make nor control that something which was to happen.

But why should this be a signal to him, this thought? "Something is happening." No, that was not all. It is happening, said the deep tremor within him, to *me*, because it is happening to humanity and I am a man.

Mrs. Wood, on her way from kitchen to dining room, stopped in the doorway, magnetized by the radio's voice. "You still listening, Mr. Gregory?" she asked. "'D they say anything more?"

"They got some aerial photographs of the city they hit. It's almost all gone."

"Well, that is remarkable, ain't it?" She sat down in a rocker and, fanning herself, rocked hypnotically as the words poured out of the radio. "Well, well," she said occasionally. "Well, well," and beat the hot air with her fan while behind her the smell of dinner cooking stole into the parlor. Gregory sat up a little straighter and considered her. Why was it that her good kind placid stupidity did not exasperate him to a frenzy? The fan and the pointless exclamations and the neat gray hair, the gold pin at her throat, the apron smoothed over her lap, the creak of the rocker, should have seemed the most irritatingly fantastic accompaniment to the arrival of this news which could mean the end of the world as easily as the end of the war. Yet Gregory was not irritated. It is happening to me, he thought, and it is happening to Mrs. Wood too. And I have no right to imagine I know any more about it than she does because I don't rock and fan and say, "Well, well." Two people, two humans.

"Well," said Mrs. Wood, "it kind of takes your breath away, don't it?"

"That's just what it does," said Gregory, and smiled at her.

Two days passed and on the third Nagasaki was bombed and the Japanese desperately offered surrender. The trembling had stopped, but it had left a legacy. Deep, deep inside, Gregory was restless. Whatever the coded message might be to which his emotion had vibrated, its immediate meaning was a breaking in on the life he had made himself. All through August he worked on at the plant, but the work was no longer sufficient. For the present was no longer sufficient. It contained him no longer. Something had happened to open its bounds and he felt not only the existence in space of all his fellow men, but the pressure of a future in time. Golden summer had almost passed, was achieving the only eternity, that which is unchanging because it is over. The days passed Gregory as if in a new dimension, the dimension of time and change. Something was coming and he felt that if he were only to lift his head and look, he would be able to see what

it was. He almost knew. . . . But for just a little while he did not look. He worked on, watching the days, feeling his restlessness, waiting.

September came, the leaves and the weather grew crisper. Each day Gregory thought that on the next he would announce his decision to leave and so arrive at it finally. Each day he waited. He was caught by nostalgia for what he still had. The summer seemed to him a real golden age, he would never have another. It was perfect because it was past and complete and nothing could happen to spoil it, it was the citadel of his spirit. Yet, knowing it complete, he could not bear to complete it. It could not be perfect if he still clung to it, his presence was the gap in its walls. But every day he thought—just one more. Just till tomorrow. Until I am sure of my strength.

Late in the golden month, the maples already turning, the elms thinning out, Cap and Gregory went fishing. They ate their lunch on a little white sand beach barely ten feet square where the noon sun lay warm. Thick pinewoods behind them sprayed out into white birch at the water's edge. Gregory finished the big sandwiches Mrs. Wood had made for him—he ate solemnly now, like a workingman, stoking his body in silence for the labor that would be asked of it—and lay back, a bottle of beer in his hand. The yellow leaves of the birches danced in the sun. When the wind overhead reached down to them, it shook a handful off into the water.

"I'm going to quit," said Gregory. The words were in his mouth before he knew it. And as he spoke he was conscious of deep relief. He had held on almost too long, his joy had become a discipline. A great and abiding sense of security sprang up in him as he released himself to chance. Summer was over, out of the pinewoods came the smell of the cold.

Cap moved, shifting his weight until he was comfortable against an old uprooted stump. "Thought you might," he said.

"I—in one way I hate like hell to go. I—you——"

"Crap," said Cap.

"No. It's not crap. I've been—— Hell. I've been happier here than I've ever been, and you're the best friend I've ever had. But I've got to go. I've got——" For a second, the first time he had

thought it all summer, he heard Ellen's name. But he couldn't say it. "I've got a lot of things I have to do," he finished, and propped himself up on one elbow to drink some beer rather uncomfortably, spilling a bit down his neck. He swore at it. "What about the plant?" he said. "Aren't the war orders being canceled? Will Peters have to shut down? What about—— What are you going to do?" Now that he had said it, it seemed perfectly natural for him to be worrying about Cap, and yet he never had before. It had always been Cap who worried about him.

"He says he's got a lot of old orders reconfirmed. Says he won't have to shut at all. If that's what you're thinking of, you needn't——"

"No. I've got to go." For a second he had an impulse to tell Cap everything—not only that he had had a son and lost him, but how he had fled from the loss, the fleeing that all his life had been, the failure of his success. The words would come easily. But what would they mean? He didn't know. No, he did not yet know what to tell Cap. The words would be nothing except a relief to him. He would not be giving Cap anything mature and intelligible, just a spate of unrelated, unvalued nonsense. Hadn't he made himself enough of a nuisance to Cap without using him as a confessional? He lay on the warm sand (not so warm after a while, it was only a thin top layer that the sun had heated) and was quiet.

This is the last day, then, he thought, the end, the end, and was swept with a desolation so vast that he had to open his eyes, stare up at the bright sky, blink against the sun, before it passed. But it did pass. That was regret, he thought, that was good-by. He waited a moment to see if it would return. No, it was over. It was the shadow from the brightness of his happiness, but a shadow that fled even as it darkened. The brightness withdrew, the shadow passed. Now he lay in daylight, strong, clear, ordinary daylight, light for working and living. He could feel his heart going about its business mechanically in his breast. His thoughts were ready to go about their business soberly, in a workmanlike way.

He pulled himself up, grinned at Cap. "Come on," he said, "I don't want to waste my last day."

It was a week, though, before he got off. Peters asked him to

finish a job and help break in the man who took over his machine. Gregory stayed. He felt no impatience now, his restlessness was gone. "I'm sorry to see you go," Peters told him. "Any time you want to come back——"

"Thanks a lot," said Gregory. "I appreciate that."

Mrs. Wood was sorry, too, and hoped he'd be back sometime, when he got his business cleared up, perhaps. "Sure," said Gregory, "you can't get rid of me that easy. I'll be back."

"And your ration book. Don't forget that again." Gregory stowed it away carefully in his pocket. "I've put up a lunch for you. Don't you lose it now——" She fussed over him as if he were her property. And indeed part of him was. A little bit of Gregory, a little bit of Mrs. Wood, were coterminous. In the citadel of his spirit, she was an inhabitant.

He went upstairs for the last time. He had bought a small cardboard suitcase and packed it carefully with his few possessions. It stood by the bed where he had slept all summer. The room was quiet. Mrs. Wood would rent it again. He did not mind. He had what it had given him. The tree outside the window shifted a little in the wind. It was golden now, and a golden circle of leaves lay under it. He could see the black branches more clearly, see its structure and the necessity of its growth. The wind blew, the tree grew, the room lay quiet. He picked up his suitcase and went out.

At the foot of the stairs Cap waited with his lunch box in his hand. They went out together, the heavy door shut, their feet went down the steps to the walk, out to the sidewalk, down the street. At the corner Cap said, "So long. Drop me a card and let me know where you are."

"Yes," said Gregory, "I'll do that." Cap went off to the plant and soberly, in the clear light, Gregory walked on, downtown to the bank where he drew out his money, downtown to the bus stop.

He rode that day through the climax of autumn, rode south, first on a bus, then on a train. All along the way the trees were a passion of color. They outlined the spurs of the hills, they turned the land into a glory, and every village square was a shrine of trees. Beneath them men and women walked about, dogs chased cats, children chased dogs. Here there was a man raking up

leaves for a bonfire. There a huge red truck laden with Pepsi-Cola pounded down a road. A girl in an open car waited at a railroad station, a man got out of the train, she opened the car door, he got in and kissed her, and they drove off. To Gregory, looking out of the window, everything seemed simple and clear.

At Hartford he got off the train. He went up to a ticket window and said, "Can you tell me how to get to Norfolk?"

"Norfolk?" said the ticket agent. "There's a bus. Leaves from around the corner."

"Thank you," said Gregory, and started out of the station. But before he reached the door of the waiting room he turned back. The suitcase in his hand was wrong. It made him—it made him at once too much the wanderer and too much the visitor who expected to move in and stay. He intended no such thing. He wasn't at all clear about what he did mean to do, but settling down at Norfolk long enough to need a clean shirt or even a toothbrush certainly played no part in it. No. They would go at once. Something inside him trembled at the thought. An intimate little terror raised its head. He began to feel sick.

Because it was familiar. He had felt like this before. Terror, and terror of the terror, spoke together. "What will I do? I can't handle it!" said terror. "Where is my strength?" asked the other. It had dissolved into a wave of quaking warmth. He stood gripping his suitcase in the center of the station.

No, said his mind, said his strength. I will not stand for this. I came for Ellen. I have been happy. After only a second he moved on rigidly, his jaw set. He left his bag at the checkroom and went out to the bus station. His will was as hard as iron, it formed a new skeleton within him, on whose bones this action laid flesh. But riding to Norfolk, he looked out the window no longer. His attention was fixed on himself, on keeping himself balanced on the road to the Talcotts' as if it were a tightrope.

He got a hitch out of Norfolk, part of the way to the house, with a chicken farmer who delivered an oration on the price of feed. It flowed past Gregory without interrupting his thought—he had only one—or relaxing his will. When the farmer swung into his yard Gregory got out, nodded his thanks, and went on up the road.

It was a hard-surfaced road in bad repair. The war had held

for three years most of the men in town who could work on the roads, and all over—even on the great parkways to the south—cracks split road surfaces, grass began to encroach. Gregory stumbled on a great gash where gravel and sand spilled out through the broken skin of tar. He recovered himself and went on. It was uphill and he went slowly.

Late afternoon, now, level golden light. He lifted his head. The trees were globes of radiance, reflecting the sun like so many moons. He stopped, all alone on the road, among the hills and fields. The farmer's white house and red barn lay behind him as precise as a new toy. And just around the bend of the road was Ellen.

Ellen in reality. Not merely the urgency within him which had brought him here and to which he had given her name, not his own ache of separation and incompleteness which he had called Ellen, but his wife—a person. He imagined her looking up as he came into the living room. Her head turned, dark hair streaked softly with gray, serenity of forehead, eyes where judgment waited, suspended until he should speak because Ellen was fair, mouth firm and determined against cozening memories. What was he going to say to Ellen? What was he going to offer her? He had three hundred and sixty-four dollars in his pocket, no job, and no intention of getting one of a kind that she could accept as proper for her husband. He was a mechanic and not a particularly skilled one at that.

He tried to imagine Ellen in a furnished room at Mrs. Wood's.

It was not the money. At the university he had got very little more than he could earn now. Ellen's income had kept them in comfort, and the balance had been kept straight between them because both had agreed on the importance of his work and the contribution his career made to the world and therefore to their marriage. He had no career now to offer Ellen's pride. He did not try to imagine himself working again in Washington, or teaching, or "doing something respectable," because it was not possible. One of the axioms he had to work with was that he was a mechanic. His hands kept him, not his head. His head was responsible for nothing but the thoughts in it and for, possibly, though he had not thought of it till just now, a slow process of education by which he might come in time to know viable reality from confu-

sion and nonsense. But that was still a ways off and must not be forced.

And yet—Ellen. In his long flight his guilt had lain quiet because it had been too big for him to face. Its quiescence had given him, this last month, the illusion of facility. This journey to Ellen had seemed so simple, a quick detour across country cutting off the great loop of flight. His instinct, telling him that it was not right for them to be apart, touching him with fear for her, had swung the path under his feet to bring him there. But now, within sight of his destination, the short cut began to seem impassable. Could he, after all, by-pass his guilt? Could this simple action annul it?

Suddenly he turned off the road and went up through a thickening of pinewoods and over a stone wall. For a little way he paralleled the graveled drive to the house, but on higher ground. Then he worked around through the woods (they were open and the pine needles were soft and springy under his feet) to the back of the house. At the edge of the trees there was an outcropping of rock. He slid out on it.

The house lay below, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. The light was almost rose now, and the whitewashed brick was rose-red burnished with gold. It was very peaceful. There was no one in sight at all. But a chimney trickled a wraith of smoke straight up in the still air. There was a feeling of people about and of smooth-running life, of comfort and care. But that was as it had always been. Gregory knitted his brows, searching for the difference in his feeling. The house had always been luxurious, had always worn an aura of physical comfort. It was not that.

It was so beautiful, that was it.

Gracious, proud, built with love and vanity, it lay in the fold of the hills, representing all the life he was leaving—no, had left—behind him. Before the architect had drawn a line, generations of study and money and comfort had built aesthetic standards; more study and money had taught them to the builder. The house was not just a house, it was a place where life could be lived a special way, spacious and elaborate and civilized. He had hated the house before, because that way of life (at any rate, as distorted and attempted by the Talcotts) had infuriated him, pocked him with envy. But he could not envy the Talcotts now

any more than he could envy a race horse or a pianist or a painter; his life was no longer comparable with theirs, and so he could at last see the beauty of the house.

His life went on in different places. He thought of Mrs. Wood's Gothic horror, of gray working-class slums he had seen. Knowing a revulsion, he knew, too, that he needed them, he wanted them. He trembled with joyful anticipation of the life in them, teeming, vital; he discovered that he was on his way there. He could hardly wait to plunge into them. He needed the intense magnetic field of such vitality with which to recharge himself. He wanted the untidy background of ugliness, the incessant crowding details of poverty—garbage pails, cobblers' shops, laundry to be washed, girls in printed dresses with their stocking seams crooked, neon lights, movies, bars with Polish or Czech names——

But how could he take Ellen there? Out of beauty and serenity like this rose-gold haven under the piled clouds of sunset?

He stared down at it, filling his eyes with details, refusing emotion in order to observe the better. Afterward when, going, he had recognized his decision to go, he would accept the emotion, but now he must collect the facts on which it would base. The screen door onto the terrace opened halfway—Gregory held his breath. Because if he saw her it would be different. He did not know what he might find himself doing if Ellen's figure came out. And the door closed again. Someone, whoever had opened the door, had shut it again. Gregory stared at it, sweating. But the door stayed closed.

At an upstairs window a Venetian blind went up with a rattle. But Gregory turned back to the door. It wasn't the room Ellen always had had, it was a corner room. Some guest was there. A curtain blew at the window—or was it a woman in a white dress?—but it wasn't Ellen's room, it wasn't Ellen.

He waited. The house ignored him. It held a conqueror's wife, not his. A hero might come back to this house for his wife, walk up, ride up the drive; there might be celebrations and blood, stories untwisted and absence sealed. But not for him. He had no need to stop at the hut of Eumaeus to darken his glory with dust. He was the ineffective dust itself, no hero, no conqueror come back from war and wanderings and goddesses' arms. The house held Ellen and must hold her. He could not take her away. To

what? To squalor and vitality? He imagined her face and Jim's. They would be concerned not with what he said but with trying to make out the depth and influence of the aberration that led him to such a crazy demand. Fly with me, Ellen, to the Naugatuck Valley or the Monongahela, to Waterbury, East Liverpool, Toledo or Indianapolis, to Gary or Muncie or Flint or Detroit——

Gregory put his head down on his arm and lay still. The rock was rough beneath him. One hand moved slowly over it. He found a little pool of pine needles in a dent in the rock. His fingers picked up a few, twisted them, broke them. After a while he felt the light go. He looked up. In the smoky west color matched the frost-touched purples and crimsons of the trees. It was going to be chilly. He shivered suddenly and got up. The lights were on in the house below. They spilled out the windows to lie on the terrace and lawn. He stood still. It was time to go. For a moment he almost regained simplicity, he almost went down across the field and the fence and the lawn to the house, went in and called, "Ellen? Ellen, where are you?" Then he turned and went away; and the saw-toothed mountains of Ithaca receded below the horizon.

Ellen said, "No, I don't think I will tonight, thank you."

"Oh, now, Mrs. Gregory," said the nurse. "You're not going to disappoint everybody, are you?" Her voice had a paid patience. Ellen thought she would give a great deal to see Miss Temple lose her temper for once. The good nature and humoring with which everyone treated her were a measure of her illness, her distance from normality.

"I don't feel like getting up," she said petulantly. "What am I going to do when I get up?"

"Why, tonight you're going downstairs for dinner!" Miss Temple promised it like a fairy godmother offering a pumpkin coach for a trip to the ball. But in Ellen's mind the coach remained severely the pumpkin. It would never transport her anywhere new and wonderful. There were no wonderful places to go.

"I don't want to go down to dinner," she said.

"Oh yes, you do," said the nurse cheerfully. When Ellen was difficult Miss Temple's good cheer simply grew to meet the situation. It never turned into anything else, anything more appropriate.

But Ellen was lying back, seeing the dining room in her mind, seeing the table set for four, the Spode plates and the crystal on the table offering an atmosphere of decorous celebration, but above the table only the faces of Marion, of Jim, of her mother. The same old trap of life. "I won't go down," she said. Miss Temple's mouth jerked—for just a moment—into lines of annoyance. But Ellen was not looking. She had turned her face away, and the easy tears were running out under her eyelashes again. "I want to go away," she said. "I don't want to stay here any longer. I want to be somewhere else. Why don't you go away? I don't like you. I'd be all right if you'd just go away and let me alone."

Oh God in heaven, thought Miss Temple, she's off again! Get her downstairs more, Dr. Dunstan says to me. I'd like to know how! I wish he was here to see her, the bitch! But there was no faintest hint of exasperation in her voice as she said, "There, there, my goodness me, now! Of course you'd like to go somewhere else and see someone new instead of poor old Miss Temple! And that's why we're going to go downstairs for dinner tonight. Downstairs for dinner tonight, and then next week a nice ride somewhere with your brother—he did so want you to go last Sunday—and in a month you'll be running around all over the place! How about it now? Will you wear this pretty yellow dress or the blue one with the pleats?"

"No," said Ellen, "no. Leave me alone." But Miss Temple would not leave her alone. She shut her eyes tight, but she could see the two dresses waving before her on their hangers in Miss Temple's red hands. "Oh, the blue one, I guess," she said weakly.

"Well, now!" Miss Temple was delighted. "That's more like it!" In defeat, Ellen pushed the covers back and slowly got up; in defeat, she went into the bathroom to wash her face. A victory had been won, but it was Miss Temple's victory. This was Miss Temple's patient getting up and going down to dinner, not Ellen Gregory. Miss Temple's patient sat at the dressing table and let Miss Temple brush her hair, though Miss Temple was clumsy

and a little rough. I wish she wouldn't pull, thought Ellen; why doesn't she let me do it myself? Her hand trembled in her lap with intention, but it did not move, it did not reach up for the brush. She sat still and let Miss Temple fix her and felt the tears ready to stir again. Tears of disappointment and irritation and little, little anger at what the world was.

Gregory walked back to Norfolk. It was dark when he got there. No one gave him a lift. Middle-aged and not in uniform, he was a suspicious figure, and the headlights swept over him and went by. His feet ached by the time he came into the town, and he had forty minutes to wait for a bus. He went into a drugstore and drank some coffee at the fountain. Then he had a chicken salad sandwich which consisted mostly of celery and boiled dressing. He ate mechanically. He felt very tired indeed. Behind him in a booth there were some young people laughing together. He wondered for a moment whether anyone might recognize him as a Talcott connection, but the idea was so absurd, he felt so remote from them and so entirely individual, that he dismissed it at once. He paid for his supper and got up wearily to go out.

In the doorway stood one of Ellen's friends. An old friend. Mary—Mary—— He couldn't remember her last name, but he knew her perfectly well. He hesitated, and in the second of his drawing back she glanced at him, dismissed him (cheap suit, dusty shoes, hair cut badly, too short over the ears and too thick on top, day's beard darkening his chin) as a workingman on his way somewhere, and walked past him. He went out without a sound and walked to the bus stop slowly with his head down, as if she could still see him and he had to be careful not to attract her attention. The bus came. He got on. And thought, sitting down, now that it was too late, that he had been a fool. He could have asked her for news of Ellen. He could have sent a message. She was a nice person, this Mary Whatever-her-name-was. She would have done the best thing for Ellen, told him to go or told him to stay, as would be right for Ellen. And he had lost the chance.

Lost the chance—but that was only a minor coincidental chance. He had lost the big chance. He had gone without seeing Ellen! He half stood up in his seat. But the bus had started. They were racketing along together, he and the driver and the half

dozen other passengers, with as much apparent purpose as though the devil rode behind them and heaven lay ahead. He had walked up to the act, to Ellen and her place in his life—and then what? What had happened? What had come down to shroud him at the moment of decision? Frustration and bitterness, the bitterness of being himself, swept over him, and he put his head down in his hands. This hopeless, eternally wrong instrument of personality which was all that he had to work with! This self which tricked him and deceived him, besotting him with reasons for irrationality, turning and turning on itself like a corkscrew, without beginning or end! He had left Ellen behind and—with a new twist of the screw—more reasons flew up to point out to him that since he was still so frustrate and double-minded, this was right. He *should* have left Ellen behind. If he had been strong and single-minded he would have seen Ellen, taken Ellen away. But unless he was strong and single-minded, he should not, could not, have taken Ellen away. And since he had not seen her, he was not the person who could have taken her away. This was the circle of his chains.

He lifted his head. A woman across the aisle was looking at him curiously. With relief his emotion turned against her and he glared. No privacy, he thought, I have no privacy! He wanted to hit something or break something, and how could he do it, here in this rattling, banging conveyance, under the woman's eyes?

She leaned over toward him and said, "What's the matter? You sick? You look awful."

Surprise took possession of him. His fury acknowledged its own absurdity and disappeared. She was trying to help him! The absurdity betrayed him into laughter. "I'm all right," he said, "thanks," and laughed.

"Well!" she said. "I was just asking! No need to laugh at a person for trying to help!" She got up angrily and stumped down the swaying bus to a seat near the driver, and here she settled herself, throwing a malevolent glance at Gregory as she did so. Alone in the back of the bus now, Gregory sat and shook with his laughter at the cross-purposes of life, the idiocy of his anger at the woman, and the woman's anger at him. Then all of a sudden he felt very tired and leaned his head against the window, and bump, bump, clatter, clatter, jerk, and sway, he rode in a half

doze, pounding through the dark until they came into Hartford.

Ahead of him the woman and the other passengers got up to get off the bus. This was the end of the line. The driver turned curiously toward him. "Here we are, Mac," he said. "We don't go no further than this. If you don't like Hartford, you shoulda stayed home."

Gregory got up. "Sorry," he said. "Guess I'm kind of sleepy."

"That's all right with me, Mac," said the driver, enjoying his role as a wit. "Maybe you'd give me a testimonial, huh? That I drive so good in this rattle-trap you can even sleep?"

"Sure," said Gregory, and stretched his mouth into a smile. "Just tell them I said so."

"And who should I tell 'em? What's your name? Harry S. Truman, perhaps?"

"General MacArthur," said Gregory, and got off the bus.

"Thanks, General," the driver called after him. "That ought to fix me up."

Gregory waved, and under the driver's eyes the necessity for movement carried him across the street and into the railroad station. There in the big echoing public room he stopped. Another civilization with the gift of externalizing its ghosts and uncertainties would have set up here a pillar to Hecate of the Divided Ways to whom all forks-in-the-road are sacred, or to Mercury, patron of thieves and travelers; but here there was nothing but the gaudy stele of the newsstand littered with bright-colored nonsense. The air was stale, flavored a little with the nineteenth-century smell of coal smoke and iron, and through it thirty or forty people drifted restlessly, waiting for trains departing or the bondage of arrivals. Where am I going? thought Gregory, staring at the schedule of trains, but he did not know, and the chalked figures were incommunicative. My God, I'm tired! His feet hurt, and leaving his destination in abeyance, he went over and sat down on a bench, wriggled his toes inside his clumsy shoes, and bent down to rub his ankles.

I didn't do it, he thought, I didn't see her, and a current of shame, weak because of his fatigue, but sufficient, ran through his veins and broke out in a sweat on his body. This is what I am, he thought, this is a thing to remember about myself. I didn't see her. I didn't do it. His slumped figure took on a symbolic value

for himself, just as he sat then, in a corner of the bench with one foot hoisted up on the other knee, his hands dirty, all of his clothes and his character a little worn and frayed from use. Holding this picture before his closed eyes, he tried to formulate a life which should be based on the fact that his will was too fragile an instrument ever to be of any use to him, a life that should be passive and drifting, relieving him forever from the necessity of bruising his volition on things he could not accomplish.

He remembered with wonder how he had set out this morning with no idea but that he would go to Ellen and talk to her, the two of them plan out the life they would now share, and embark together on it. All by nightfall. It had actually seemed easy. No, more than easy. Inevitable. Because he had stopped running away from the things he could not handle, he had thought that now he could handle them. But to stop running away was not enough. He still could not handle what he had run from.

But I don't want to run any more, he thought. He opened his eyes. Tired as he was, what he was feeling did not correspond to the symbolic figure of defeat on which he had been concentrating. He sat up and stretched his shoulders back. The icy crags and pinnacles of his relationship with Ellen, its world-encompassing views, still hung over him; but not with terror. It was a challenge and a demand. He stared at it openmouthed. Why, he was going to climb it, he was *still* going to climb it! But how could he have imagined that he could do it in one day? Why, you god-damn fool! he said to himself in an explosion of knowledge. You tried to pull off a miracle. Who the hell do you think you are?

His self-derision gave him the spasm of cheer he needed, a kind of tough-minded return to reality. He looked around the railroad station. This was Hartford, and where was he going now? He had not seen his wife; he had a long way to go around the easy gradients of the mountain before he could reach her. He was a man alone, but a man with a name and a trade. And it was nine-thirty in the evening. These things seemed to him the data of the problem, from which he was to triangulate his destination.

But it was silly to make it a problem. He was babying himself. He knew where he was going and what he had to do, and he knew that it would not be easy and that it was possible. Between the inevitable and the impossible lay a whole middle ground of

what was hard but could be done. It was just there that he had remade his life in Vermont. Why should he have thought that in leaving Vermont he had left this region of action? Why should he have imagined that he could transcend its limits and reduce everything once again to what was easy—and what was impossible? Its limits—the things, like this thing, which he could just do—were the conditions of his freedom.

He was going to Washington—away from Ellen and back to her. Back as a tourist into the city where he had worked for ten years. Back as an artisan, a man with a trade, to gawk at government and its inappropriate but revealing marble. Power corrupts, he thought, and grinned briefly. In clichés, *veritas*. Why don't we believe it when we have power? Because it's always the opposition that says so? Well, he had thrown away whatever power he had had, now he would go and look at the scene of his corruption.

Here we go again, he thought, getting up, and walked across the marble floor to the line at the ticket window. His feet still hurt. He felt every step, hay-foot, straw-foot across the waiting room, every step a new beginning, motion recreated again and again, his will and intelligence the only constant, the only guarantee that the uniformity of nature would set him down tomorrow morning in Washington.

CHAPTER 10

No flight, no miracle, brought him there. but the night-long pounding of the wheels on the rails, the rails so many feet long and so many of them, the wheels turning a perfectly finite number of times. Down from Hartford to New Haven. Wait there for the sleeper from Boston. Then on again, propped up in a coach seat, through the darkness to New York, over Hell Gate Bridge to the mouth of the tunnel, but Hell Gate and the tunnel leading to no Erebus save the dead air under Penn Station. And wait again. And then out, still in darkness, to the Jersey swamps and down through the flat seacoast land and the hideous cities until, crossing the Susquehanna, the sun came up out of the smooth gray sea, a glowing disk of tin over the steel of the bay.

All night Gregory sat putting his memories in order, trying to prepare himself for what he had to do in Washington, and to understand what had happened to him there; what he had done and what he had meant to do in the city to which he was returning. Ten years of his life. Ten years of the time given him between his birth in November 1899 and the unknown day of his death, a countable solid block of time. He saw it as a lighted stage on which his figure repeated a series of gestures; he could see the mouth opening and shutting but he could not hear the words, it was in his mind a pantomime, this ten years in Washington, which he must interpret, deciphering the meaning from the hieroglyphics which the figure executed. Small, black, distant, flailing its semaphore flags in a silent frenzy, John Gregory's memory of himself retailed its message to the past, and John Gregory's present self, straining his eyes to read the signals, was conscious of eavesdropping.

What was the message? The figure jerked about so. What had John Gregory been doing in Washington? Why had he come?

It was guilt, he realized. Or was guilt too easy a generalization? There had been a need to be satisfied too. Life with Ellen, with young Tim, at the university, had been too easy. Even 1932 had not been able to shrink Ellen's fortune to anything but wealth. That had not given him security. It had frightened him. He remembered standing at the window of his warm comfortable study one winter day and watching the bitter wind dash scraps of dirty paper across the street. The paper came out of the rubbish piled for the garbage collector in front of the house opposite, and it had blown loose because a man was picking over the garbage, looking for something to eat. Gregory went out and gave the man ten dollars. The man thanked him very decently and went away. The cook, who had seen everything, predicted direly that every bum in town would be around looking for a handout now; but it wasn't so. He'd never seen the man again and no one else had troubled them. But all evening and recurrently for weeks afterward Gregory had found himself thinking, Suppose that were I? What would I do? And worst of all, How long can ten dollars last?

It wasn't only guilt. It was wonder and it was envy. That man was in contact with primary experience. Nothing sheltered him from the bitter wind. Nothing annulled—for him—the workings of fate. When things happened, that man felt them.

But Gregory didn't. He was safe. Nothing happened to him at all.

He went to Washington in order to feel something. It was not out of a desire to serve those who needed help so desperately (though they *had* needed it, and he was ready to agree with his old self that they had been helped). It was to satisfy his terrible hunger for contact with people and reality. His work at the university had drifted into a halfhearted and formal relationship; the boys he taught were types, groups, not individuals. Timmy was growing up, he had his own boy-gang interests. And Ellen . . . But Ellen had urged him to go to Washington. She had thought it a wonderful idea.

And it had worked. He had never been so happy in his life as during those first years in the boiling, excited city. There had been companionship. There had been sides to be taken, friends and enemies. There had been standards of judgment waiting for

him; no longer had he had to make his lonely way through the world, depending on his own ability to reach decisions. And money hadn't mattered either. No one was judged by his salary. Rich man, poor man, rich wife, or country girl who'd never owned a set of sterling in her life—it didn't matter. Everyone knew that senators and Cabinet officers were paid an absurd pittance compared to the businessmen of the states they came from. No, it was power that counted. There was a hierarchy, of course, but it was based on power. Real power, not titular power. Gregory had come to wield it too.

He had not been so happy then. He moved uneasily in his seat, glanced out at the night through which the train plunged. No, the first years had been the best. Companionship had been easier, more spontaneous. It was only natural, he saw now, that power should have isolated him a bit. But he had not dared to allow himself to move apart or become different. He had clutched passionately at common feeling, at participation.

Roosevelt had been the symbol of his participation with people, in life. To see Roosevelt as the great man he had been was not enough (although, Gregory realized, he had already begun to be able to see Roosevelt as only a great man, talking with Cap in Vermont. He'd hardly noticed his changed attitude at the time—but then we so often notice a change only weeks after it happens). In Washington, though, for Gregory, Roosevelt had been more than man, more than hero; semi-divinity had clothed him. He had justified all action, settled all debate, made doubt absurd. And when he died . . .

The world crumbled. Gregory shivered. He was visited for a moment with a memory of the terror he had felt, flying from Washington. The god he had made in Roosevelt's image was dead. Gregory had descended to harrow hell in his name. But it was only a *man* who died—Gregory had made his own hell too—the torn shreds of myth, half recognized but still powerful, whirled in Gregory's head. Why have I had to travel so far since he died? Because I am looking for something. What? I don't know. Is it Ellen? But I can't go to Ellen yet. . . .

Ellen hated Roosevelt. Perhaps she made him a myth too, made him a devil, where I made him a god. He wasn't either. I must remember that when I think back and try to see how things

were. He was a man—a great man, with complicated faults and simple virtues. Over and over again his enemies—they were Gregory's enemies too—had accused him of lying, with chapter and verse and letters and telegrams to prove it; of lying and double-dealing and corruption and megalomaniac ambition. And then they had started all over again and proved it once more.

But that was just it, thought Gregory. Why had they had to prove it so often, if it were true? They had seen the magnificence and confusion of life and growth as disaster and lying. But—for whatever the judgment was worth—they had been wrong.

Why, John, said the President's voice in his ear, with the big half-warm, half-derisive laughter behind it, why, John, did you have to worry about that?

Yes, I did, Mr. President, thought Gregory. You didn't have to, perhaps, but I did.

For the letters and telegrams were true, each incident existed. Again and again he, that great man, had lied and broken his word to the men around him. So it was important now to understand, once and for all, how it could be that he was no liar and no man of bad faith. Breaker of promises to his intimates he had been, provoker of heartbreak in Jim Farley and fury in John Nance Garner. But he had never broken the relationship with the people. Here his simplicity had kept him right. He had never condescended to them. He had never belittled them. He had believed in them as simply and implicitly as they believed in him—more simply even than had Lincoln, who had been more intellectual and less instinctive and whose will had therefore had to be called into force where the President, where Roosevelt, had moved intuitively. He was capricious, he strained the bonds sometimes, he joked when he should have been serious, but he was almost never callous or stupid to the other partner of this relationship, and he never presumed. He was, in a way, one of the most humble men in Gregory's Washington. For he never—even at the end when he had lain alone in a corner, sick and old and badgered like an old lion in a second-rate circus, surrounded by the brassy and moth-eaten pomp of wars and the death of empires—he never forgot that he was an instrument, not a prime mover. And he was the instrument not of fate, like Napoleon, or of history, like Washington, but of all the fates and all the histories of the people of

America who were the partner of his long and most intimate relationship.

His dignity had been the dignity of the people of America.

Ellen hated him, thought Gregory restlessly, because she didn't understand that. She saw only the political trickery.

But could he condemn Ellen for that? Clickety-clack, said the train on the bridge, rushing from the horror of the Bronx to the horror of Queens. For, said his mind, rushing on to horrified self-knowledge, had he, Gregory, ever shown her anything but the political trickery? Had he not become a trickster? The fascination of the mechanics of trickery had become his major emotion, sustained and justified by his adoration for the man he had served. Participation had become a drug, manipulation had been his life-work, his art. Yes, Ellen was right, he had been worse than distorted; clinging to the one emotion he had been able to feel, the crowd-emotion of comradeship, he had crowded out everything but his specialty, his concentration had become obsession. He was that fantastic abortion, a bureaucrat, and not even a genial one, tempered with humor and humility, but a fanatic, dedicated devotee, a cunning fighter within the hierarchy. And outside the hierarchy—with Ellen, that is, for everything else fell within its bounds—an idiot or a madman. No, it was not he alone who had paid for his happiness.

Astonishment shook him, but with astonishment, recognition of truth. Ellen, Ellen, he thought, what have I done to you? He saw, as the malodorous Jersey flats flew by, the ten years of torture, of constant nagging, constant disappointment, constant inability to understand, that he had offered Ellen in Washington. Like a great flood of filth, as if a sewer had broken, came the knowledge. He swam in it desperately. Ellen, Ellen, what have I done? Left you to the senators' wives and the receptions, the nonsense of protocol (and always new protocol as the hierarchy of power changed and shifted, but which I never bothered to explain), sacrificed you to the hierarchy, laughed at you, nagged you, made fun of your ideas, made love to you in silence and darkness, found satisfaction and no meaning and hated you for it. Crippled you because I was crippled, blinded you because I was blind, and saw you then as crippled and blind. Hated your money and lived on

it and scolded you for spoiling Timmy—scolded you for love and believed you incapable of it and counted on your love and tore at it, tore at it, till I left it in bloody shreds.

And yet I loved you and love you now.

He opened his eyes. The wheels were carrying him farther and farther from her with every mumbling click. He felt dizzy, spun out on a great arc of flight from the center which was Ellen. But he flew on, catching his breath at the speed, knowing this necessary and the arc an arc. He had tried to go to her and he could not. He must make this fabulous journey, complete the circle, experience the adventures that lay before him, before he could come home. Revisit in another guise the city where those ten years had been lived through, day after day.

That was the worst thought of all. Ten years he had put her through, 3650 days and nights, each day awakened to, lived through, and left behind with no hope for change or anything better, each one twenty-four hours long, every hour with its sixty minutes, every minute its sixty chances of pain. And the aching nerves growing numb, adjusting to pain, expecting it as normality, but no ease coming with the numbness, the nerves fraying through in spite of it, the calluses becoming cancers. . . .

And all of this I did.

How can I support such guilt? Oh God, how can I bear the knowledge? And yet each act I undertook and carried through, each act demands its own acknowledgment and expiation. For every single morning and evening and every minute between, I am responsible. Ellen, Ellen, he cried to himself, as if her name could ease him. Ellen, Ellen, Ellen—each repetition a bow to another act of guilt, become now an act of repentance, but bringing no forgiveness. Ellen and Ellen alone could forgive him and he could not go to Ellen yet, he was flying off on the outward arc, and how many mornings and evenings and the minutes between must be lived through before he could go home?

He was very tired as the train came into Washington and he felt curiously displaced, outside himself, as he walked up the open platform in the warmish tired air. The edge of autumn had been blunted somewhere last night in the miles he had ridden through, it was still late summer here. Unbelievably, this was still the same season of warmth that he had fled out of last April. Looking

around the station in the clear dusty light, he felt as if a thousand years had passed since that time (or had he dreamed the thousand years?), and the air indeed smelled as if it had stagnated that long. He paused in the station. This was return, this was a climax in his story; John-the-same-and-not-the-same, he had reached the place where his flight had begun, over there was the window where he had bought a ticket to Florida. Disgust? Anguish? He wondered what he would feel. But the ordeal of the night had been too much. In the middle of the station, he yawned appallingly. My God, I'm tired, he thought. I want to sleep. He ached with weariness, it was all he could think of. Yet, curiously, the ache in his tired muscles was apart from him, his body seemed not himself but merely a possession for which he was responsible. It was tired and he wanted to lay it down and put it to sleep as a mother does with a fretful child.

The hotels must be full, he thought, rubbing his forehead. What is today, anyway? He was too tired to be sure. He'd left Vermont at the end of the week—but that was so long ago! He edged over to a newsstand and glanced obliquely at the papers. Sunday. Why, it was Sunday! Had it been only yesterday that was the Saturday morning he left? Incredible! But on Sunday, at any rate, the hotels would be less full, perhaps he could get a room—and wavering with fatigue and hunger, he set out into the city, unconscious now of all the pain and terror he had known and caused here, looking only for a little room, a cubbyhole, where he could rest.

The first hotel had no rooms, but the smell of coffee led him into its restaurant and he ate breakfast. He felt better then and went on. In the third he managed to get a room for the day on his promise to leave before six. He went upstairs—the assurance of sleep was now an agony of anticipation—left a call for five-thirty, pulled off his clothes, and fell into bed and into sleep like falling down a well.

Over Washington the hot day wore on. The Brazilian Ambassador was giving a luncheon, and Mrs. Pearl Mesta was planning a cocktail party for three hundred. Two men in a hotel room discussed the cancellation of a contract for naval aircraft, and a young man who was reputed to be close to a Supreme Court justice listened restlessly to a California lawyer talk about tide-

lands oil and states rights. Eight atomic scientists sat around a rather shabby living room drinking beer and composing a letter to Bernard Baruch. The zoo was crammed with peanut-eating children, and up and down the bridle paths in Rock Creek Park jounced inexperienced but determined riders. Back yards were full of sitters, turning their faces peacefully to the sun.

The hours passed, the sun slid slowly westward. Noises from the street, invading Gregory's dreams like revenants from another world, twitched him over on his back. He half awoke, breathed heavily, and slid back to the depths of sleep, taking with him some queer half knowledge of the passage of time. But it was a feeling not of urgency, but of immersion in the stream, of acceptance. Cradled on this current of change, he could find rest, its very motion sustaining him. Deeper and deeper he sank into the shining stream of sleep and time, descending like a grave trout into the clear depths where the greater pressure brought him the paradox of lightness, until the illusion of floating free merged with reality and he knew that this deep acceptance was the only freedom. And secure, slept on.

All that hot day Rose, alone in her apartment, was packing—packing not to depart, but to be left. Yesterday Katie had got married. Yesterday Katie, in a pale beige suit with orchids on her shoulder, had married an Army captain in the chapel of St. Agnes's. It was the kind of marriage that Katie would make, the kind that came at the end of a fairy story—pretty Katie with her quick witty docility and grace, and a dark-haired young man, tall and beautiful with power, and adoring her. And Rose, who had cried with excitement and pleasure at the wedding, cried again now into the towels she was packing, such beautiful thick, extravagantly monogrammed towels, into which she was neatly and tightly wedging one of the sugar and creamer sets. So many presents Katie had got, and a house waiting outside Chicago. . . . The boxes were stacked all over. Katie had wanted to readdress them and ship them straight to Chicago, but Rose had made her open them all—"I'll pack them up again for you, honey. No, I don't mind. It'll be fun." Well, it wasn't exactly fun, but it was something to do on this first long lonesome Sunday. Of course she was alone and working like this by choice, she'd turned down two invitations. She was packing for Katie and missing Katie because

she wanted to, because it seemed somehow fitting. Later, in a week or two, she'd find a new roommate—she'd be able to pick and choose. But there would never be anyone quite like Katie. . . . Oh dear, thought Rose, looking at the late sunlight, I haven't even started on her clothes! I've got to get the closets cleared if anyone's going to come in next week! And she got to her feet, but instead of getting out the old Pullman case Katie had left behind when she went off with her new luggage, she went over to the window and leaned out on the sill, looking past the court to the shiny leaves of the magnolia in the garden of the house next door and wishing and wanting and waiting for she didn't know what—just a quick small crisis of longing and distress. What's to become of me? cried Rose to the future, and the magnolia leaves nodded in the hot dry autumn breeze. But the lost lonesome hour of afternoon was all asking, there was no answer anywhere to be found, only the knowledge that someday, sometime, things would be different, she would not lean out like this, wondering and yearning. Or would they? I'm twenty-nine, she thought, I'm old, old, old.

When the telephone shrilled Gregory awake he did not know where he was, and reached out for it automatically in the gesture learned and practiced at so many other wakings in so many strange rooms. "It's five-thirty," sang the voice of the operator in his ear. "Thank you," he said, and lay for a moment, still holding the telephone, without the faintest idea of why the hour should have been named to him. The instrument cracked and chirped like a grumpy bird and he put it back quickly and clumsily before it could ask him anything. Where am I? he thought, still lying half dazed in a puddle of sleep. Late afternoon, the sunlight on the window shade told him, and warm, warmer than he'd been used to. Then a great waking stretch convulsed him, sleep seeped back to the underground river, and he knew where he was. Washington.

Lying there confronting his whereabouts, he was suddenly desolate. The promises of sleep had taken their certainties with them. Why had he come here? What more could he find out than he knew already? It was a stupid, a puerile, thing to have done, to have felt that he must mechanically retrace his steps in this fashion. Surely this was an unnecessary detour that would bring him

no pertinent knowledge. What could he learn from the chaotic marble-granite-and-red-brick city, from its trees and its avenues and its monuments? Had he not lived here long enough to be sure that there was nothing new for him to find? This quick return would only confuse the memories that he had to pick over!

The sun glimmered more coldly. He got up in a mood of tedium and boredom with his own companionship. He was anxious to be somewhere else, but the necessity of choosing a new destination was unpleasant and a little frightening. To pick a new place out of a hat containing the names of all the cities of America—it would have to be done very quickly. He had too much time. Or not enough. For he wished that he did not have to do it at all, that someone would give him a reason for going here or going there—but he was alone. He went into the bathroom and shaved and showered carefully, keeping his attention on the moment. When he was dressed he closed his little bag and went out, feeling very envious of the man to whom this room might be home, for whom he must make way.

Out in the sunset street he stood irresolute, but he was hungry and so walked on looking for a restaurant that would not be too crowded. After several blocks (he was sweating a little now, a warm dusty wind was blowing) his knowledge of the city came back and he found a place that he remembered where, after a drink at the bar, he got a table. The food was good of its kind; he had corned beef and cabbage and beer, and when he finished there were not many people left. He sat over his coffee, feeling more cheerful, full, and contented, watching the other people there, middle-aged mostly, but here and there a young girl and a man in uniform.

But then it was time to go. He paid his check and went out again into the street. It was dark now and the wind was colder. He walked through the dark from street lamp to street lamp, knowing he must do something, go somewhere, try the hotels again, or find at the railroad station the next train to he did not know where. He was unwilling to choose but aware that choice was necessary, and so unwilling to compromise on a movie theater, for it seemed to him that that would be a distraction, it would only confuse and postpone the moment of choice which must come soon but which hovered still above him, refusing the bless-

ing of its descent. Wondering, meeting the edge of the wind, observing as he passed the shopwindows, the lighted houses, the passers-by in the street, the children playing their last evening game, he walked through the city, block after block. The wind blew, outlining his spare lonely figure, isolating him in the cold dark; the bag bumped his leg; the neighborhood changed from stores to houses and back.

Then through a drugstore window he saw a telephone booth, like a cue. Only half believing, he went in, fished for a nickel, put his bag down, and pulled the door closed. Ellen is in Norfolk, he thought, though he couldn't for the moment remember how he knew this so certainly. But the number he called, his finger steady on the dial but his heart pounding, was the old number of the apartment. Whom was he calling? Not Ellen. His own past then, their shared past in the guilty apartment? The buzz of the ringing phone sounded. It had not been disconnected. Who would answer out of last year? He could not imagine.

But someone took the receiver up and a woman's voice said, "Hello?" Stunned, he fumbled for a moment before he could answer, "Hello. Is this—is Mrs.— Is this the Gregorys' apartment?"

"Hello," said the voice again, irritably. "Who is it you want? Did you say Gregory?"

"Yes. I— Yes." He waited to be told it was a wrong number.

"Well—the Gregorys *used* to live here. I don't know— Who's this calling?"

"This— It's a—a friend."

"Oh. Well, they're not here." She was not, her tone implied, giving out information to any anonymous friends. Gregory fought for something to say; there must be something he could find out— Then curiosity—he could hear it—overcame the voice at the other end of the line. "Who was it you wanted? Mrs. Gregory's in Connecticut— I don't know whether I should— What did you say your name was?"

"I'm an old friend of Mr. Gregory's," he said quickly. "I've been overseas—just got back. I didn't know they'd moved."

"Oh, I see. Well, of course." She was softening to the returned-soldier gambit. "Well, now, I don't know if Mr. Gregory—"

Oh, wait a minute. I know. Why don't you call Miss Carmody? She's—she used to be Mr. Gregory's secretary——”

“Yes, I know.”

“And we rented the apartment through her; she handled it, I mean. Now why don't you call her? I've got the number right here—just wait a minute—— Yes. Wyoming 8372. Have you got that? That's Miss Carmody. She'll know.”

“Yes, I'm sure she will,” said Gregory. “Thank you so much.” He hung up and leaned against the wall, for a minute conscious of a desire to laugh. Rose. And all his thoughts had flowed smoothly round her, unable to bring her name into their solution. The strange voice had had to say it for him. Well, the sibyl had answered. He reached for another nickel and then thought, No. He had been lucky once. But he did not want to stand and wait again while the ringing buzzed in his ear, once—twice—again—and no one picked up the phone. And if the Bell Telephone Company had played oracle once, was it not taking an awful chance to ask it to do so again? He left the booth and opened the telephone book on the rack next to it. C for Carmody. Rose. He found the address and felt through his pockets for something to write it on. In his left jacket pocket was a letter. He took it out, and turned it over. And there was the return address and the name Rose Carmody. It was the letter Rose had written when she sent him his ration book. It had been in his pocket all this time. Rose, he thought, why Rose! And all the self-questioning and exploration of the past which he had gone through on the train dimmed and faded, for to see Rose would be to walk into the future and to scratch across the pattern of the past new letters and a new design. He put the letter back in his pocket, picked up his bag, and went out.

He couldn't get a cab, of course—the only one he saw fled past him disdainfully—and since he didn't know exactly where he was when he started, it took him a while and two changes of trolley to reach the corner of Rose's street. He didn't mind. The letter, the thought of Rose, gave him a sense of security and purpose. He liked having to wait, to make one of those irritatingly complicated urban journeys involving transfers and peering out at street signs, holding onto a strap and stooping to see through the top of the window, being shouted at hoarsely by the conductor when his

stop arrived. Ding, ding, ding, said the bell, preceding him through the windy dark like a Wagnerian motif, as if he were Lohengrin being drawn on stage by a hideously squawking swan. And he changed, giving up one transfer for another, and proceeded at right angles in a geometric maze through the chess-board city where everyone's move is two ahead and one over, never a simple meandering. Then he was out in the dark again and walking up the block to the ugly thirty-year-old apartment house where Rose lived, which he had never seen before.

When the bell rang she was down on her knees beside the Pullman case, packing the clothes that Katie had not wanted to take on her honeymoon, the part of her wardrobe that was not trousseau but was still useful (rather like the life they had lived during the war, Rose thought, unromantic—or rather, pre-romantic for Katie—but not to be thrown away or forgotten). She was hot and tired and dusty and she sat back on her heels and stretched her shoulders while she considered whether or not to push the buzzer that would release the door downstairs. She was quite sure who it was—three or four of her friends who had been at the wedding and with whom she had refused to spend the day. They had been riding in Rock Creek Park and they'd driven out into Virginia for cocktails and dinner and were now stopping to cheer her up. She didn't feel much like being cheered up. The bell rang again. Oh, damn, she thought, they know I'm here, they won't go away. I'd better let them in and give them one drink and throw them out. It'll be easier than sitting here while they ring and ring. . . . So she got up and went out and opened the door, pushed the button next to it, and waited till she heard the front door, two flights down, swing open. "Come on up," she called, "the door's open," left it on the latch, and went back inside to tidy out of the way the stack of clothes that remained. She smoothed them quickly into the suitcase, pulled down the lid, and was fighting the locks when she heard the door open.

"Hi," she called out, "come on in," and wondered for the second before she looked up why everybody was so quiet. Then she did look up.

To Gregory in the doorway (the way opened and made easy before him), the room was like a lighted cave. For a moment he saw the kneeling figure in its center only as part of the whole

thing, of warmth and light and comfort. The boxes piled around on chairs, the three blouses hanging from a doorknob which Rose had forgotten, were extra bits of color and coziness. Everything swam a little before his eyes like a vision. Then Rose said, "John. Why, John," and started to get to her feet and stumbled, and he saw, as she caught herself awkwardly on one hand, that the face looking up at him (dust on her cheek) was dead white. She is shocked; I should have phoned, he thought, and as he did, concern for him, worry for him, came into her face too. She came quickly toward him, her lips were parted a little. As she crossed the littered room, a new knowledge awoke in him. What have I done to Rose! he thought; he had just time to think this, to see another debt, a whole new dark pathway back to his past, and Rose reached him, and as if he had always known that someday he would do this, as if he had at last reached a goal he had been straining toward for years, he took her in his arms and kissed her. It was a clumsy kiss, but it shook him as he could not remember being shaken, and Rose began to cry.

"Why, Rose, why, my darling," he said. For him, this was the peak of revelation, the moment when he had the widest view, and the way he always summed up everything that happened when he remembered it.

But for Rose it was not. She had dreamed before (though this was not a thing to tell Katie) that Gregory was kissing her, and the memory of her dreams betrayed her into attempting a return to normality. She pushed herself away from him and said, "You mustn't mind, I always cry, you know; I cry in the movies at Mother and the flag— Oh, John, how are you? Come and sit down. I'll get you a drink—you must want a drink——" And she flew out to the kitchenette where she loosened ice cubes and washed her face with her handkerchief and sobbed and combed her hair back with her fingers. Her resolution, forcing back her emotions, put her into a tumult as she came back with the highballs. She handed Gregory his at the end of her outstretched arm and went and sat down stiffly on the edge of a chair. "Where have you been?" she said.

"In Vermont. Working. I'm a machinist." This didn't make any sense to her and she ignored it. "Why are you packing?" Gregory went on wonderingly. "Are you going away?"

"No, it's Katie, she got married—my roommate, you know. She got married yesterday to such a nice——" But her voice failed as she looked at him. John, tell me, tell me, she wanted to cry out, tell me everything, but she couldn't. It seemed to her as if such a question could be asked only in his arms, and she dared not wish herself back there. It had been like a dream, and the dreams had never meant anything. She hunted desperately for something to say. On what a rack to have to make conversation—and to John!

He was looking around the room with mild curiosity, sipping his drink. He had one foot cocked up on the other knee. What is different about him? Rose asked herself distractedly. He was always thin, and he's not gone gray, and he always slouched like that—but something was different. He seemed somehow more at home in his body, more relaxed. "This is a nice place," he said. "Have you lived here long?"

"Six years," said Rose, wanting to laugh and cry.

He smiled at her. She shut her eyes for a second to keep from doing something silly. "Tell me, how's Washington?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"Oh, it's a mess, I guess," said Rose swiftly, and looking at her drink, sipping it, shifting it from hand to hand, she began to give him all the news and gossip she could think of.

"Uh-huh," he said, listening. After a few minutes he got up and began to roam restlessly around the room. He took a cigarette and offered her one. She shook her head and then changed her mind and nodded. He came over and lit it for her while she paused in her talk, and she trembled as he stood above her, but he did not touch her. He only walked around fingering things, laughing once in a while, asking about someone now and then, but she felt every step shake her body; when he picked up something new it was her skin he touched. She became aware as she talked that he was really in some part a new person. At any rate, he had never been able to terrify her like this. Or was it just that he had never been here where she lived, where she dreamed, before? It was a new situation. But he had created the new situation, he had come here. She lost the thread of what she was saying. He was standing near the doorway to the hall and the kitchenette. "Do you want another drink?" she asked.

"No," he said, and she saw his face as he put down his glass and turned to her and thought, I must remember that this is what John looks like now, and then he flicked the light switch by the door and the room fell into darkness. She heard him coming toward her; he stumbled over the suitcase on the floor and said, "God damn it." He was standing above her. She reached for the table to set down her glass. His arm knocked it out of her hand.

"There goes my drink," she said.

"I'll get you another." His voice was very quiet and controlled, but she could hear his breathing even before she felt the rise and fall of his chest, and his arms were hard and hurt her.

CHAPTER 11

And now in the dark, the simple inevitable dream was transmuted into reality. But reality was monstrous, multidimensional. Where had simplicity, inevitability, gone? I am frightened, I am frightened, thought Rose, I will not have it, I don't want— But that was not true, not true either. Partly true and, as reality cleft her, partly a lie. . . . She spun in a kaleidoscope of constantly unfolding paradox. The warm black velvet curtain that draped the inside of her mind in its endearing privacy was pierced now by a cold blast of air. The dream was gone, she was bereft! And in its place was only a strangeness. Yes, it was real; she clasped him now in her arms, she strained him to her, and it was a sword that she strained to her, his body was bulky agony on her, hard in her arms. And real.

The old dark gods—the sentence came complete, formed, from the back of her mind—the old dark gods said this was holy. She repeated it. It was meant to comfort and reveal.

And Mary when the angel spoke—

No! she argued now. That's blasphemous. And not true. Strange, but not this strangeness. Her mind dropped the argument a moment, recurred to her body, comparing. But the argument wanted to go on. And perhaps if it left her body alone to accept—

Not Mary, pierced with love and the compassion that illuminated it so that she knew at once what blessing was. But an older story. The old dark gods. An earlier strangeness, magical, not divine. A golden shower. A bull. A swan. Leda and the swan.

An analogy. Yes, she saw that now. Teach them young. Teach the young girls that strangeness comes, that no dreaming prepares for reality, that a new thing is monstrous and multidimensional. I must be humble, thought Rose, until I know. There will be

myself to put on again later, like a glove over the changed thing inside.

He spoke then, a voice that cut like a wire sweeping through the dark. Vibrant. She knew why voice had been given its name. "Rose. Am I hurting you?"

"No, dear," she said. He had lifted his head, breathing and looking about him. She lay still. After a long time, when he was quiet, she cried a little. She was not sure why—for what she had lost and not lost, for what she had gained and not gained. But he was asleep long before. He did not hear her.

So the dark hours went over till dawn grayed the window. Gregory slept exhausted, sprawled like a runner at the end of his race. Rose slept her way to the ambiguous day, paradox sealed by sleep, never to be resolved until changed, motion as end and beginning, its own antithesis. Can change ever be new? Can new be only change? And are we wrong to wonder, prodding the probe of the mind into the living muscle of emotion? There in the dark rock of sleep, love and contradiction are one, we must have light to see the difference, light on the mountains unfolding their peaks and crevasses and distances. And even the rock and the light perhaps are one. Before the voice speaks, creating.

Ellen had a dream that night, of Timmy. In her dream he looked as he had the summer when he had been—what? Twelve? Eleven, perhaps. The first summer they had been in Washington, anyway. A tall boy, almost as tall as she was, but not gawky yet, well built, well knit. His hair had sunburned in streaks, light on top, from the fierce spring sun. His skin was brown and little boy's skin still, not the faintest hint of the whiskers and pimples of adolescence to come. He was at the very peak and perfection of being a boy; next year his hands and feet would get too big and his voice begin to change. But this year Ellen kept looking and looking at him, photographing him again and again on her brain.

John had wanted him to go to camp.

"That's absurd," Ellen had said, and she repeated it now, shrugging uneasily against the pillow. Absurd! As if they ever got any of the real business of country living at a camp, leading an

artificially regulated life with a horde of little monsters—— Besides, if John didn't want to let him go to boarding school (and she'd never heard anything so silly; what would become of him at college if he didn't know anyone, if he hadn't been to school?), if John wouldn't let him go away to school, why should he go away for two months to some dirty camp that no one knew anything about? It wasn't as if he had nowhere to go. And here was the trouble, of course. In Norfolk, Jim was going to give him a horse. In Norfolk, he could spend the summer in real country, working on a project he would adore, learning, and training the horse which was a natural jumper, Jim wrote.

"But there's no one his age," John said.

"The girls——" Ellen began.

"He doesn't want girls," said John. And suddenly his voice was furious. "Do you want him to be a sissy?"

And Ellen could still feel the burst of passionate contradiction and contempt that had leaped up at his words. She shut her lips on it; she wouldn't think even now of what it was that she hadn't said to her husband. But she shook, she shook with fury. And in her dream Tim came riding the horse that had never been his (for he'd gone to camp that summer and come home with infected tonsils), with the sun on his sun-streaked hair and on the bright black horse between his knees. She wanted to run to meet him and laugh, but she couldn't move because like a wave it came to her that he wasn't dead then, he wasn't dead! John had lied to her. The whole convincing fabricated story of all those later years had been a lie! How like John! To act out that story just that convincingly—and yet she knew now that it had been a lie, and knew, too, that she had never been quite convinced, had always doubted a little.

She woke quite happy, and Miss Temple was very pleased, and the doctor was pleased, and everyone felt that Ellen had taken a turn for the better and started to become her old self again. Even Marion was encouraged and dared to hope that the nurse might soon go, and all the friction in the kitchen and the trouble about trays be over. But Ellen hugged her secret to herself and did not tell anyone what she had learned.

Thus Ellen woke—but that was late, there was already sunlight on the pleasant green foothills of madness. Far away, long

before, Gregory had waked already in the first grayness. He did not know where he was; but something knew. Something was waiting for him in the growing dawn. It was panic.

The weight and the warmth! Yes, it was there, it was real, lying along the left side of his body which had grown so used to waking alone. And where was the tree, the great gold tree? Far away in another land, all that sanctuary which he had forsaken. The white-painted bed was empty, his room was empty, his place in Vermont deserted, filled only with crystalline silence. He had come away, driven unknowing to this. To this warmth where he lay in terror.

She would wake soon. He was awake already. He could hear her steady breathing. From the light, it was early morning. He thought of shifting enough to see his wrist watch; he tried stealthily to lift his arm, but her breathing changed. He froze.

I am a prisoner, he thought.

What have I done? How could I do this? How leave my safety and my peace? I had got free. How could I come back! Come back to the warmth and the weight and the other body against mine. . . . He moaned.

Instantly he knew that she was awake. His fright mounted unbearably. He had lost the last moment of escape. In this five o'clock light he must now confront all the disjointed past and the chimeras of the future which this mating would bring forth. Oh God. Oh God.

She lifted her head and the world revolved like a Ferris wheel while he stared at the face which he knew so intimately and which was not the face he had expected to see.

The arc of flight. It had carried him here! His heart pumped, his lungs ached, at the speed of his passage. The cold air through which he sped was itself a blow; his numbed mind ached as it strove to reach the place where his body lay. Rose! Rose! The side of her face which had lain against his shoulder was reddened. Her eyes were hazel, clear, gray-green, the color of deep water.

"John," she said, "what is it, dear? What is it? Your heart is bumping so." She put her hand on his chest over the hammering heart so that it beat now against a further cage beyond that of his ribs, the prison of her fingers. "It waked me up," she said, and

smiled. "It bounced me up." Over the changed thing she had put on herself.

But Gregory was naked still in astonishment and could not speak.

It was Rose who broke their gaze. He was impaled on her look like a butterfly on a pin, it was not right. She put her head down again on his shoulder gently, not only sparing him the stare of her steady eyes, but doing it sweetly, as if to say that she wanted to lie just so, as she had lain. But his hurrying heart would not let her be. The unfamiliar demon of self-pity took possession of her for a moment. "What is it, John? Are you sorry?" she said.

I must answer that, he thought. She must not think I regret—— "No, Rosie," he said. His voice sounded rusty in his ears. He cleared his throat and tightened his arm around her. "I'm not sorry," he said valiantly. But his freed voice wouldn't stop. "I'm frightened," he said. It was as if his voice were the clapper of a bell. As soon as he had spoken he could feel himself begin to shake, reverberating to the blows of fear and inadequacy.

This was awful, this was terrible, to wake and find himself in Rose's arms! How could he have done it? What fatality had forced him to tie himself so, to involve himself with this woman, Rose? He shut his eyes and plunged backward through the strokes of the bell, backward into the dark, back toward the abyss of terror from which he had always been climbing. Let go, let go, he told himself. It was almost as if his defeat and surrender were some kind of a triumph. As if his weakness were a kind of attack, an attack he had never dared make before but whose thought he had always held hidden somewhere in the back of his head.

Revenge, revenge on women! Revenge for the agony of his marriage! It seemed to him then that it had all been agony, his years with Ellen; he could not remember or imagine joy. Revenge, revenge, cried terror and hate, bursting out of him now, revenge for the black marriage, the dark underside of love! For the first time he saw (and so saw *only*) the awful demands it had made on him, how he had been stretched on the rack of his manhood, how he had wanted to cry and to run away—and always unavailingly. For always, always, there had had to be the assertion to the woman Ellen, I am your master, I am your husband. You will be pleased when I please you. I am the act, the con-

sciousness, you are merely the function of me, the necessary other.

But with it all the time was the knowledge that this wasn't so. He had not absorbed her. She was still free, still free—and hostile? How could he be sure? God, how could any man be sure? How could any man live with a woman, that sly other consciousness always there, working against him in the dark? How did other men manage? How did they dare close the door on their wives in the morning and go off to work, leaving those others behind to do their evil magic all day long until their spells clung like spider webs to every corner? What was a man thinking of to marry one woman and give her such power? If they were at least secluded in harems, married by the dozen, and thus reduced to nothing but physical conveniences and decorative evidences of wealth and power—that would be right, that would be as it should be. They should be kept apart, kept apart!

Otherwise—and now in the abyss memory shook and buffeted him—otherwise they were let loose as destroyers. It was their pleasure, it was their business. Their fury was cunning, their jealousy indistinguishable from their love. They were the wet black depths, the salt wave from the womb whose purpose was to corrode all manhood—to create it, provoke it, use it, and reduce it to nothing, eat it away. All little baby girls, curled sweetly in sleep like the seeds in their pods, all wild young things blown desperately, regretfully, into womanhood and clinging still to the echo of the faraway other-meaning music of childhood, all these had no end but to become wife, mother, and intimate enemy; and at the end, at the last, in all of them waited the demon hag, the witch, whom men had burned for centuries and women always worshiped. He remembered the hand on his shoulder of the woman who had been his mother, biting into the flesh. He remembered Mrs. Grandi in Florida, robbing him and staring him down from the great fat citadel of her body. He remembered Ellen's voice—“You killed him, you did it, you killed him——” Timmy! His son, made over to the women and destroyed!

And was he not, himself, destroyed too? What had his escape been but a little run on a leading string which was over now, and he pulled back to a woman in the place he had run from, to the warmth of the other body in the bed, the demon hag from

whom he had always run and never been free. A reflex of escape it had been, like a mouse from a cat, but not out of reach of the heavy paw lifted so easily to toss him back to torment. The torment that all his life had been, horror piled on horror, the warmth and the love and the purring closeness of fear. . . .

This bed the last—no, not the last, only the present. This love the final irony—no, not final, only the one he must live through today.

“John,” said Rose, “why are you frightened? Are you frightened of me?”

How long have I been lying here, he thought, since I spoke, since she asked me that? How can I cover up, how can I conceal, what can I say to her that will not be true? His brain twittered like a frantic bird. And could find nothing, no lie, no concealment. “Yes, I am,” he said. He took a deep breath. This was surrender into her hands, the woman’s hands. It was also the most enormous relief.

Rose laughed.

He was stunned. After a second he opened his lips—they were dry—and said, “What is it? What’s so funny?”

“I think it’s so nice of you,” she said (her voice was all warm and bubbly with laughter), “I think it’s so sweet of you to say you’re frightened of me. Oh, if you knew, if you knew how you terrified me! Oh, John, you’ll never know, never be able to understand—even now, even a girl like me! Can you imagine how little we know about men till we’ve been to bed with one? And me with four brothers? And all my sisters’ husbands so grumpy in the morning and swearing and eating breakfast in their undershirts, out at the beach, and me laughing and sympathizing with them, while my sisters look out of the corners of their eyes, you know, as if to say, ‘Oh, she’ll find out later, you wait, she’ll be the same!’ And me frightened and angry at them, at all the married folk; and I nothing but an aunt or a good old thing, a sister-in-law? And everything we know about men, then, is a little wrong, it seems? And that mixes us up and makes it worse! Ah, why don’t they tell us the truth? I suppose because they can’t. It’s something that has to be found out. Who could have told me and made me believe it that you’d say you were frightened of me?”

"I'm not just saying it, dear. I am. I was, anyway," he ended doubtfully. Because, he found, he wanted to laugh a little now, and shake her a little. It was astounding. It was not that he had come up out of the pit. The pit had vanished, and instead of the demon hag of darkness he was in bed with a sweetness named Rose. This was amazing. He felt, like her, a little indignant. Why had no one ever told him that there were women whose love-making had a fine foamy head to it like good beer?

"Was?" she asked. "But it's better now since I opened my mouth and all the nonsense flew out?"

"That's right," he said.

"Whist," said Rose, "the boom will ate you!" She leaned over the edge of the bed and said inquiringly, "Won't you, boom?" then squeaked the answer, "Yiss, ma'am."

Gregory laughed. He laughed till his muscles ached. "What's a boom, Rose?"

"A bum, of course, silly. A tramp. What're you laughing so for if you don't understand a word I'm saying? Just touched, that's all. Why, that's how my aunt used to frighten her little old dog. 'The boom'll ate you,' she'd say—the bum will eat you, of course, and then look out the door and ask the bum to confirm—'Won't you, boom?' And the boom—bum—said, 'Yiss, ma'am.' And the little dog would retire under a chair. And till I was nine or so, I was never so sure myself that the boom hadn't winked at her when she looked out the door, that there was *something* there. Oh, the Irish like to harrow their children a little. And it's not a bad thing either. Because of course they're always laughing at you—at the children, I mean, and so the children—the ones with sense, at any rate—grow up to know there's something funny and something made-up-on-purpose about ghosts and things, and never get so scared of them that they take them seriously. Not all the way seriously, anyway. Oh, it's not the children who are brought up on ghost stories that're afraid of ghosts—it's the ones who have to be brave all the time, poor little souls."

"Like me," said Gregory. There was no need to say it, she was not asking him anything now. He was making her a free gift of it, of all the knowledge he had guarded so secretly, all the weapons against him.

"You, dear? Well, perhaps. But you are brave, John. Very

brave. You don't know how brave you are. So many things other people are afraid of you just walk by without looking at——"

"I ran away, Rosie. That was a bad thing to do."

"Yes. Yes, it was. But was that because you weren't brave? I think it was more because you were stupid, John darling. You made most of that trouble yourself. I don't know all about it, John—or even much about it, I guess. But you must have been wanting to run, you know, from way back. And didn't know any other way to get out than by—by what you did. By making it impossible for yourself to stay."

Gregory started to speak and then stopped. He had a great impulse to argue with her, but he didn't know, he found, on what grounds. It wasn't that she was indisputably right, but rather that she was looking at him from outside, which was for him a totally new concept. Good heavens! All this time, of course, while he had been flung frantically about the country—robbed, betrayed, and then (as irrationally, it still seemed to him) befriended and helped—all this time Rose had been thinking about him, considering him, working out theories about his behavior! Quite reasonable theories, too, no doubt. Rose was a smart girl. The idea of himself as a continuing concern in someone else's mind was quite shocking. He had forgotten all this, the shadow his life threw on other people's.

"It was when you didn't grieve," said Rose, "that I began to worry. Didn't grieve for Timmy."

"For Timmy?" said Gregory. His voice was so cold it hurt his lips. "Didn't grieve?"

"Well, you didn't, John. I don't mean you didn't feel it. But what did you do? Do you remember? You sat quite still and clutched me because I was the nearest thing to you, and you didn't cry. Not one tear. And then you went out and, I judged from your face the next day, got into a fight. Didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," he said shamefacedly. "A nonsensical fight with a cabdriver. I—— What has that got to do with the way I feel about—Timmy?"

"I don't know," said Rose reasonably. "I didn't do it. But it's what you did. Why should you have to get into a fight and not cry at all? You were paralyzed there like a block of lava in your chair, John. You froze up. My dear, my dear, you must cry when

you're hurt, you must tell me when you're frightened! Not just me, I mean—anyone. What's flesh and blood for, if not to help us bear our troubles together? Dear heart, surely for all those years we were friends. You shouldn't have frozen up. You must make demands on your friends, you know. You mustn't be eternally doing them favors and snubbing them!"

"Did I do that?"

"Well—yes. Quite a lot. Have you stopped now, do you think?"

"I—I'll try to if I haven't. After all—last night—— This is quite a demand on you."

"Mmm. Well, maybe so. No, I was going to get mad there for a minute, but I see what you mean. But don't be thinking you're here just *because* you demanded it, don't get that idea in your head. This is my pleasure too, you know, Mr. Gregory, not merely your own."

Gregory laughed again. He couldn't remember when he had laughed so often before. "Did she get her feelings hurt, then?" he said. "Did no one think she had feelings? My pretty Rose. My sweet Rosie."

John, she wanted to say, John, stop. Wait. You haven't told me—— You haven't said—— Are you here to stay? But she couldn't say it. And what could he answer anyway? For she was quite sure he was not. He was still maimed, that was perfectly clear. He was not whole, he was still traveling. He had come to her for comfort, and perhaps together they could heal some of the wounds of the past. At least that long dry eight years between them would have an end, the relationship would gain some meaning, though what meaning it would be she could not tell. Now all that she could see was that—soon—he would go away again. Oh dear, oh dear, she thought, I know just how it will be. I shall be so hurt, I shall cry so, it will be over, and what will it mean? Nothing? Nothing at all? It will be finished and over, the eight years and this too; and it was in an agony of unaccepted completion that she received him as he turned to her again. This is for him, she said to herself sternly, this is all for him, I expect nothing, there is nothing for me but to lie quiet and be what he needs—darkness or laughter, quiet or gaiety. Open-eyed, she watched the curtains blow into the little room, beyond them the

open window and the gray edge of the building and all the dawn-empty outside world whence he had come and where he would go when this was done. I am nothing. This is for him.

And at that very moment, mocking her wisdom with laughter that loved her, pleasure picked her up and flung her against him. Unbelieving, ravished with wonder, she felt the fountain of joy break loose within her. "No, no," she cried out in astonishment, and John was smiling at her. "No, no!" Her head turned back and forth, she gasped and cried, his mouth came down on hers, holding her still, but no, not still, moving together, mounting together. Until she found what completion was and knew that if what her words promised was this, she was content.

Magic, when craftily done, changes not only present and future but the past as well. For Rose and Gregory as lovers, their old relationship did not die but constantly re-created itself. The foreground of the present illuminated the past, but it was the past which gave depth and meaning to the next days. It was as if the eight years behind them had suddenly blossomed. The blossom was quite different from the brown stem which supported it, but the two were necessary to each other. Gregory, hearing Rose whistling cheerfully as she moved about the kitchenette, found himself remembering the purse to her lips in the office and saw it now as the soundless merry whistle it had been. The impulse was the sign of Rose's independence, its suppression the evidence of her sense of propriety and rightness. Rose had, he found, this sense to a great degree. And knew, realizing it, that he had always known it, always counted on it, always asked her judgment on the work he was doing.

It was not only judgment she had and offered him unquestioningly. It was vitality. He felt as if he'd been existing in the wrong climate all his life, under a too-hot desert sun. He was dehydrated. In the temperate delight of Rose's world his squinted eyes opened wider, his tensed muscles relaxed. Things happened that were neither menace nor desperate opportunities, but merely pleasant, amusing, and instructive to an end that was not just survival. There was a great flow of energy, of water and wind and sunlight

and rain in Rose's life, while in his, all his effort had been just barely enough to pump a trickle of water for irrigation up from the underground river.

Only had he not himself forced the river underground? His diminished energy which had caused his inability to react to people and things—was it not so slight because so much was spent back at the source in the hills of childhood, in piling boulders and sand over the bed of the river, diverting it into stalactite-filled caves, reducing it to a faint, hardly heard rumble? Now that the dammed river had broken through his engineering work back to the light, he was beginning to think so. Perhaps along its new banks—and he did not know yet even where they would be—the forests and meadows of Rose's world would have a chance to spring up; the pleasant and absurd fauna of wooded countries, the deer and possum and flirt-tailed squirrels, the fat shiny-eyed rabbits and glinting birds, would move in slowly where the lizards had lived before.

He learned all this, but it did not make him whole. Rather, it split him more. The new life did not join onto the past at all. It denied it. To be happy with Rose was very, very pleasant but very strange. It was not a way of life.

And yet—it might be possible to make a new life. Lying in bed in the morning, he watched her comb her hair at the mirror. Speculatively he gazed at the reflected face. Already in this two—no, three—days together, he had come to know it so well that he could not tell anything from it. He did not even know whether she was pretty or not. Gray-green eyes with dark lashes, full-lipped mouth, pointed chin, cheekbones broad, squarish forehead—it was a mask. Behind it, Rose lived in secrecy and security even stronger than in the old days. Then she had reached out to him more, to help him. She had been articulate about what he needed. Now, she felt for him directly and sprayed him with laughter and words, but they were seldom about what was between them. Or they were, perhaps, but obliquely—it was hard for him to follow her mind. She doubled around behind him, dashed ahead, came back, and was beside him when he needed her—but he could not always be beside her.

He thought experimentally of living the rest of his life with her, of lying in bed every morning while she brushed her hair.

That would be just like being married, said his reflexes.

It would be being married, Gregory answered indignantly.

That's what we said, replied the reflexes.

But of course it wasn't. And the difference was the past. It would not be like being married, because it would not be like being married had been. Only—could he compare? Could he think about that? Could he admit his life was all one piece and that, being married again to Rose, he would be the same man who had been married to——

Ellen? To whom he had said—and meant, felt it beneath his heart—I love you still? Could he ever say anything to Ellen that denied those words?

How had he loved her? In pain, in torment, in envy. She had hurt him. Their love had never been free of claws. When he had hurt her she had turned to him, thirsting for revenge, and taken it; neither of them knowing. It was a deep, old part of his trouble. It had kept him from going to her when he had thought himself healed. He had been healed only superficially; the scabs which had protected him against the rest of the world had disappeared, but the wounds of his love for Ellen had been puckered and bloody still.

What of her wounds? he thought now. It frightened him. He sat up in bed.

"Rose," he said abruptly, "have you seen Ellen? Have you heard from her lately?"

Rose sat very still in front of her mirror. She did not know that her face masked her against him, and she was aware of sharp anger that he should have asked her the question just then when he could stare over her bare shoulder at the reflection of her face and she could not turn it away, but had to look at it herself also. Her anger made her color flush up.

He got out of bed and put his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "That was a hell of a thing to say. I——" His lips worked. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"I'm not sorry," said Rose. "It has to be talked about, I guess." She turned around in her chair now so that she didn't have to look in the mirror any more. He went over to his clothes and pulled on a pair of shorts. She said to the long curve of his bending back, "I haven't talked to Ellen since June. I called her when

I got your letter asking for your ration book. I should have called her again," she added slowly.

"Why?" Gregory asked.

Rose hesitated. She did not want to tell him why. She did not want to say to him that she had been worried about Ellen. Not because she didn't want to confess that she had been worried and done nothing; she did not mind having to be ashamed of herself. But it would worry him. That wasn't fair.

"Oh—because," she said.

"How was she then?" asked Gregory. He did not look at Rose. His lips were trembling.

Rose considered his back thoughtfully. The best thing to do for both of them would be to lie to him, to lull his Ellen-worry back to sleep. She knew it, she had tried to avoid his question. But to lie outright—she didn't like to lie. It made life seem somehow worthless. It took the color out, faded it. It seemed to her very important that her relationship with Gregory should not suffer this devaluation. Not for the first time, it struck her that she was doing both a difficult and a dangerous thing in loving him. She was in a very exposed position. It would be hard to live as honestly and fully, with as much self-respect as she always had, and carry on this affair. Of course she did not expect it to be carried on long—it was not the kind of thing that could endure. That was perhaps why she had risked it? Only—just lately, yesterday, during the emotion-filled month that yesterday had seemed—she had been wondering whether she was not weakening. I never learned to compromise, she thought. That is what my married sisters have against me. Twenty-nine or not, I am young and romantic. Yesterday, however, it had begun to seem almost possible to compromise, to lie for the sake of happiness. She had begun to forget her young girl's honor already.

Now she looked at him—he was not very handsome, she had to admit; he stooped and his tummy wasn't flat the way it should be—and tried to decide whether to lie or not. It would be perfectly easy to say, "She was all right," in the slightly offended tone that would end his questions forever.

I won't do it, she decided. This is a very funny situation, and I might as well risk everything because actually I have nothing

to lose. Everything is lost, you might say, to start with. I never had it.

"I don't think she was very well, John," she said. "She was under a strain. I could feel it." It was going to worry him, she supposed, but she couldn't help it.

Gregory straightened up and rubbed the back of his head. "Where was she?"

"In Norfolk. I wrote you that."

"Yeah, I guess you did." He went over and sat down on the edge of the bed and swore—not very effectually, Rose thought, not a patch on her Uncle Bryan when he got swearing. But there was a raw edge to Gregory's profanity; it came from a spot that hurt. "I always hated that goddamn place," he ended, "and those goddamn people. Now they've got her again. She's never happy there for long. And now she can't get out."

"Why can't she?" asked Rose peaceably.

Gregory shrugged. "I can't get her," he said.

"She can get out by herself if she wants, surely," said Rose. "She has plenty of money. In fact, she told me she planned to go to New York."

"Really?" Gregory looked up at her. "You never told me that." He sounded accusing.

"I didn't have a chance," said Rose faintly.

Gregory wasn't listening. "Then she wasn't there at all!" he said. The idea seemed to excite him. He laughed. "She wasn't there at all! And I sat there for hours looking at the house, scared to go in, and she was in New York all the time. Jesus Christ!" He leaned back on the bed and laughed again.

"When was this?" asked Rose.

"Just now." He shook his head and got up. "It's a good thing to find out you're a fool once in a while," he said, and went into the bathroom.

Rose picked up her hairbrush again and consulted with herself in the mirror. She had not meant to imply anything as definite as Gregory had understood. She had doubted—she doubted now, remembering the indefinable aura of indecision that had clung to Ellen's voice—she doubted that Ellen had gone to New York. She had meant only to point out that Ellen was, after all, no lost young princess who could be saved from the dragon of her

family connection only by an armed hero; that Ellen was a well-to-do woman of middle age with considerable social experience. Should she tell Gregory so? The gray-green eyes looked back. She leaned forward and ran lipstick over her mouth. Then she shut her eyes. Really, that was carrying truth-telling too far. And she had no idea what the truth was. After all, Ellen really had said she was going—— You know damn well she didn't go, Rose said to herself.

Gregory was running the shower in the bathroom and whistling "Loch Lomond" off key.

No, I don't know she didn't, argued the other half of Rose's mind tartly. She put down the brush, stood up, and slammed shut the drawer she had opened. And there's nothing to tell him. She went out to the kitchenette and began to squeeze oranges. After a while she thought, I guess I'm beginning to compromise. But there was nothing she could think of to do about it.

They went to the zoo that afternoon. It was a pleasant day, sunny and warm. Rose had calmly called her office on Monday morning to say that she had come down with a grippy cold and would not be in for several days. She did not feel at all guilty, and it was not fear of being seen that had kept her and Gregory within the apartment till now. Was it because Ellen's name had come between them that they had gone out this afternoon? It had been inconclusive enough, that mention of Ellen. Nothing had changed, unless it was that Gregory seemed more cheerful and resolved, thinking of Ellen safely away from her family and living in New York.

The bears had just been fed. Moth-eaten from the hot summer, they sat in the sun with their shaggy legs stuck out before them and champed incontinently at their big cakes of meat and meal. Their ungainliness had an elusive human charm, the charm of the big awkward man whom children adore and clamber over. "It's too bad they're so big," Rose said. "And difficult to housebreak, I presume. I've always thought I'd like to have a bear. They walk flat on their feet, like a man. Of course, skunks do too."

But Gregory said in a tone of surprise, "I used to bring Timmy here."

"Of course you did," said Rose after a minute. "Where else would you?"

"But not for a long time. It was a long time ago."

"He wouldn't be so interested as he grew up. There'd be other things he'd want to do. Movies, baseball——"

"That's right," Gregory assented. She put her hand on his arm and drew him along. She was blinking back tears. Yes, he is still maimed, she was thinking, still not right. Being with him was like walking down a country road at night. You'd be going along fine and then all of a sudden you'd come to a hole in the road and your foot would find nothing where you stepped. You'd come down with an awful teeth-shaking jar that extra two or three inches that was just enough to stop your heart with the fear of falling forever. She looked up at him. His eyes went over her head, their gaze turning slowly from the seals to the balloon man and the peanut vendor. He was back ten years and the bonds of relation that held him were the interests of a small boy who would be hungry for peanuts but too big for balloons. For this moment he was recapturing the past, complete. Yes, thought Rose, but don't let the past recapture him! Let him be able to get out! Don't let him be trapped back there.

"It's an awful thing," said Gregory slowly, his voice rough, "to live longer than your son. I don't suppose you ever get used to it."

"Yes," said Rose. Thank God, she added to herself, he can talk about it. Thank God!

"Your life surrounds his as if you'd swallowed him. He should be going on past you. What other hope have we? When your father dies you know that you are the one now who is going on, who is out in front. But there ought to be a wave forming in back of us to pass us and go on when we're over. And now Timmy is dead and there's nothing to go past me. I'll just end—like that. I can't get used to it."

"You have to think——" Rose began, and stopped to clear her throat. "You have to think that the wave is still there even if Timmy isn't part of it. It isn't only your own son, John. You have a right to other people's sons too. The wave is as much yours even without Timmy in it. It will go on. We're all part of it—part of each other. The Church is wrongheaded sometimes, I think, but it says we are all members of one another, and that's true."

"No," said Gregory, "it's not the same. You don't understand. You've never had a son."

That hurt. Rose tried to comfort herself with mocking at him. To think that he was trying to tell *her* something about family feeling, she of the Clan Carmody, whose affections and cross-purposes a dozen sagas could not exhaust! Absurd! But he had hurt her. No, she had no son. She looked down at her body and the thought of its barrenness was a pang. She was twenty-nine. She had wasted a dozen years of childbearing—almost half her time. Even if she married tomorrow, those years would be gone, and the sons and daughters who came would be denied the older brothers and sisters who should be waiting to tease and love and instruct them. And what had she to show for it? A great skill at stenography, the ability to handle important people on the telephone and to typewrite quickly; and the man who walked beside her today. But would not walk there next week. What have I done! she thought. I must have been mad. To have traded twelve years and half a dozen children for this! She tried to argue with herself and to remember the things that had been wrong about the boys who had wanted to marry her so many years ago in Rhode Island. But the arguments had little comfort in them. She couldn't remember the boys clearly, and their faults seemed now to have been no more than the natural awkwardnesses of youth. Whereas the man beside her had the power to hurt her beyond words, to shake the foundations of her life and make her doubt everything. And she could not hurt him back.

"I would like a son," Rose said. She looked around blindly. The sunlight dazzled her eyes. Gregory was walking her slowly toward one of the buildings. She let him lead her in. It was the elephant house, she found, and the odor was rank, but not as bad as the monkeys.

They went over to the rail and leaned there, looking together at the big gray jelly-bulk of one of the beasts. He was turning the faucet in his compartment on and off with the finger at the end of his trunk, obviously proud of this accomplishment. His little eyes rolled about to see whether he was being properly admired.

"You should have sons," said Gregory. "You would be wonderful with them. With girls too. Maybe even better with girls because you would bring them up to be kind."

"Thank you, John," she said. She wanted to say more, to express her astonished gratitude for his words and his perception. No one had ever said anything more beautiful to her, but she could not tell him this without weeping on his shoulder there in front of the elephant, who would certainly resent it. Rose blinked and looked hard at the creature whose eye twinkled happily back.

"Rose," said Gregory close over her head, his arm through hers, "I must go away soon, you know, next week, I guess. I am going out to get a job in a place like Detroit. I can work a radial drill quite well; I should make sixty dollars a week at least. Will you come with me?"

I am going to faint, thought Rose. She hung on hard with both hands to the rail in front of the elephant and hoped that the dizziness in her head would pass before anyone noticed what was happening to her. It seemed to take a very long time and she wanted to answer John, but she couldn't.

He waited for a minute, embarrassed, she realized, before he bent to look at her and said, "What is it, dear?"

"You surprised me," she managed faintly. "I think we'd better go outside. It smells so in here and the elephant's getting angry because we aren't paying any attention to him." Gregory led her to the door. Her knees were shaking. "I think I'd like to sit down," she said. There was a bench nearby, and he got her there and sat her down on it. He sat beside her with one arm along the back of the bench, and leaned toward her. His face was full of concern for her.

"What's the matter, dear?" he said again. "I didn't mean to upset you. I thought you'd know or guess——"

"No," said Rose, "I didn't." She shut her eyes and breathed deeply. After the elephant house, the air smelled as clean as the coast of Maine. The sun fell on her face, the fantastic zoo noises were music for a ballet. The whole earth was chuckling to itself as it spun about the sun.

"Will you come, then?" asked Gregory.

Oh yes, cried her body, her shaky knees and smiling lips; oh yes, oh yes, said the places he had kissed and touched.

But Rose opened her eyes and looked at him gravely. This is my whole life, she thought. I owe it to the children to be careful. I owe it to me. And to him. Marriage is a sacrament. It is some-

thing you make that is capable of being blessed. It has to be a part of life, not a thing that denies and can be denied.

"John," she said, "what about Ellen?" She wanted to cry, saying it, and the lonely earth, hurling itself about its center, was not laughing any longer.

CHAPTER 12

Now how could he answer that? He stared at her in surprise. What has Ellen to do with this? he almost said. But she was looking at him gravely, sadly, and as he looked into her face he could feel that first childish reaction of surprise, almost of exasperation, begin to pass. "Rose," he said, "couldn't you come with me without thinking about Ellen? Have you thought about—that—this week?"

She flushed, and he saw that he had made her angry, though he didn't know why. How could he imagine that Rose, who had given him so much, shown him a new world, a new way to live, that dear, lucky, happy Rose could take his simple question amiss? Could he visited for a moment with the idea that he was taunting her with her "easiness," possibly even with her "cheapness"? She seemed so secure to him. He could not imagine her thinking he meant to hurt her! But she said briefly, "You're married to Ellen. How could I go away with you?"

"But how is it any different?" he persisted, and again she could not see that he was asking innocently, that he really wanted her to explain the difference between this dream-week and a permanent life together.

"It's all very well for you to say that," she said in a strained voice. "It's all right for a man. But a woman—has to think about—herself," she finished, choking back a prideful indignant sob.

"Dear heart," he said (he still sounded surprised, and that, she thought, was what made her angriest), "do you think I *wouldn't* think about you?"

"Yes," said Rose, "I do think so."

He looked at her, ready to speak, ready to argue. But no arguments came to him and he shut his mouth again; while over him crept, very slowly, a realization of what he had asked her, of what

she was asking him. A realization, that is, of the actual situation; in which he, John Gregory, and a girl named Rose Carmody sat together on a park bench in the middle of the Washington zoo debating the emotions and morals which might unite or separate the flesh and blood which surrounded and fed the innocent debating brain. From the peanut shells littering the asphalt path to the bright autumnal sunshine and the wind with the faintest edge to it; from the frayed cuff on the sleeve of his shirt and his dusty shoes to the great portentous architecture of the city around them; from Rose's hands in white-stitched black fabric gloves clutching each other on top of her pocketbook to the actual power existing behind those pompous façades which bragged of it so unconvincingly; he stretched his mind slowly, eagerly, trying to realize the moment, the place, the meaning of this interview as it really was. Reality. This is the world, the only world. Not a world I can make in my head. Not a warm Rose-world to wrap about me in place of the lost, the tormenting Ellen-world—but just the world as it is. Shared, overlapping my dream and Rose's dream, but different.

"Rose," he said, "I wasn't thinking about you, you're quite right. I haven't at all—except to be grateful. But I will."

"Grateful?" said Rose. "Thank you very much. Oh, thank you."

"Now look," he said, "don't be angry. You have every right to be angry. But I want——"

"I'm not angry!" said Rose furiously.

This was really astonishing, and he gazed at her in bewilderment.

"And if I am," she went on, "haven't I a right? Who has a better right? You don't see——"

"Yes, I do! That's what I said! Only——"

"You don't see any difference if you're married or not—— If you take me off that way and then leave me—— You don't even offer to—— And what about me? Suppose she *did* divorce you? Did it ever occur to you that I'm a Catholic, and all right, maybe I don't go to Mass any more except when I'm home, but it means something to me? You're married in the eyes of God, and it's a sin, that's what it is, a mortal sin, and you don't—you don't even—try to tell me—it isn't! You don't even argue!" she ended, and her voice went up in a wail and broke.

"Rose," he said, "darling——" But he wanted intensely to laugh. He had asked her to lead a life of sin, and what she resented was not that at all but that when she raised an objection he did not argue! It was affectionate laughter; it expressed what was no doubt the deepest emotion he felt toward her, a kind of rapturous and surprised pleasure.

But she heard the laughter, and everything within her which had been trying to tell her that she was making an unnecessary and unbecoming scene fled away, overwhelmed at his amusement. She became nothing but rage, possessed by fury. She stood up, said something that he could not understand (nor she remember later), and hit him across the face with all her strength.

Water sprang out of his eyes and darkened the whole scene like a curtain falling at the end of an act. He could feel something slimy run down his upper lip. His tongue, licking experimentally, told him that it was blood. There was a hazy numbness in his nose, but he knew it covered an outraged ache that would take over at once when the haze wore off. Then he blinked. The world shifted and dazzled glitteringly in his eyes and at last slowly cleared enough for him to see Rose standing there, white-faced and appalled at what she had done but still, in spite of the blood, angry enough to do it again if only to justify doing it once.

There was a chorus of amazed, shocked, indignant voices all around them. Were children to be brought to the zoo to witness such acts of passion, as inexplicable and upsetting to the explaining adults as if they had stumbled on a couple naked and rutting? What was a nurse, a mother, an aunt to say to the voices that cried shrilly, "What did she do that for? No, look, over there, what did she hit him for?" At that moment Rose and Gregory were as much hated as any hustled victim of a lynch mob. Rose, standing proudly before him, ready to strike him again, did not realize, was too lost, too abandoned to sense the danger (and if not *really* danger, certainly everything that smelled of it—mob fury, outrage, hate). But Gregory could feel it everywhere. He stood up, took Rose by the arm above the elbow, turned her around, and walked her smartly up the path toward the exit from the park, and the voices behind them hissed into silence and then broke into excited gabbling.

He was walking Rose too fast. She stumbled and gasped. He noted it and kept on going till he got her around a bend in the

path near some concealing shrubbery. There he paused to delve in his back pockets for a handkerchief. The thick blood had run off his jaw and spotted his coat by now. He leaned forward trying to bleed directly onto the ground, shook his head, and then blew his nose furiously to clear it. The slow dark drip of blood changed at once to a bright red spurt which no handkerchief could stanch.

"Have you no sense?" cried Rose. "You mustn't blow it! Bend your head back. Back! Press your lip here. And the back of your neck."

"I'll choke," said Gregory, gulping blood, straining his head back, wiping desperately with the slippery handkerchief.

"And welcome to it!" said Rose. "How could you say such things to me?" Her anger was smaller, almost petty now, but she clung to it vindictively. As long as he bled she must have a reason for making him bleed.

Absorbed in physical astonishment at his plight, he did not answer. She felt herself growing cold with shame and fright. In spite of herself, her anger was dissolving and, with it, her armor. Against his anger now she would have no defense. What have I done, what have I done? she thought, trying distractedly to remember his words, the exact emphasis and turn of phrase that had provoked her. He had laughed at her, that was it. Why had it frightened her so? But she knew. She knew now, and instead of being angry she was terrified. "You don't love me," she said.

"For God's sake," said Gregory, "shut up!" He lowered his head experimentally and swallowed once or twice. His face was streaked with drying blood.

Rose looked at him, and one quick hysterical giggle escaped her.

He took no notice of her at all, but stalked grimly over to a cast-iron drinking fountain and soaked his handkerchief in it. Then he washed his face carefully, grimacing as he did so. "All right," he said at last, "come on," and reached for her arm.

She drew away from him.

"All right," he said again, "I won't touch you; but for Christ's sake, let's get out of here." She bent her head because, stupidly, her eyes were tearing now, and walked along beside him. He still was going too fast for her. She tried to keep up, but he was always

just ahead of her, not looking back. They were going uphill. Her side began to hurt.

"Wait a minute, John," she said, and stopped. He stopped on the slope ahead of her and turned. The sun fell on his face. Through her tears she could not see his swelling nose and discolored cheek, but only the shape of his face, the darkness of the eyes, the determination of the chin, the hunger of the mouth. He was tall above her. She could not look at him any longer and turned her face away, feeling within her the yearning womb-clutch and its denial all at once. I love him, I love him; I never did before, I didn't know what it meant, but I love him now and it is hopeless, said her emotion to the tall bareheaded, sun-gilded figure before her. She had been sorry for him and flattered; she had wanted to help him because he had come to her for help, to heal him because he needed healing and she longed to see herself as healer, as needed. All that was over. All the reasons that had brought her to his arms were now invalidated, out of date. I love him, she thought, and was rent with pain at the knowledge. She had no defenses left at all now; he could have everything she had or was, and she knew that he did not love her, that he could not value her correctly, and that still maimed, still traveling, he must hurt her as she had never been hurt before. Yet all that she could want was that hurt because it came from him. Before, she had not considered them together, herself and John. She had shut her mind against the picture they really made and seen it as a sort of fairy story. But now he had power over her.

"I'm sorry," she said painfully. "I'm out of breath."

"Why, Rose," he said, "I've been walking too fast. I'll slow down." He took her arm—she could not bring herself to avoid it again—and they went on slowly to the exit.

He was lucky enough to wave a cab to a stop, and they rode back to the apartment in silence. Rose was dazed with the pain of her new situation, Gregory concerned with concealing his battered face. He moaned or grunted once or twice and wiped his nose every few minutes or so, checking the diminishing flow of blood with anxious scrutiny. It was late afternoon when they came home up the sour-smelling marble stairs to the imitation-wood door of the apartment, where Rose fumbled over the key. Then the door swung open onto the place they had left—the

three small crowded rooms so inappropriate to passion, reducing it to sordidness and squalor.

Rose went in and took off her hat and gloves. She put them down with her pocketbook on top of a table and went over to the window. Here was the same view that she had looked at Sunday—the fire-escaped court of the apartment house, the high brick wall of the house next door, and the magnolia tree behind it. But on Sunday it had seemed to have a connection with her. If it had given no answer to her longing, it had at least submitted to her questioning. But she felt now unrelated to all life, as alone as a rock in the sea. Her only relationship was with Gregory, and it could never bring her anything. She was cut off, alien. How did this happen to me? she thought, resting her forehead against the window, feeling the cool glass grow slowly warm.

Gregory was moving about the apartment, but she couldn't have been more uninterested in what he was doing. She heard the water run in the bathroom and in a little while he came back. She could feel him looking at her before he spoke. At last he said tentatively, "Rose."

"Yes."

"What can I do about my face?"

"I don't know," she said. Then she lifted her head for a moment, tried to respond. "Ice, I guess. Wrap up some ice cubes in a towel."

He waited a second, as if he expected her to do it for him. When she did not move he went out to the kitchenette and she could hear him wrestling with an ice tray and making a to-do with the water, getting the ice out. I ought to help him, she thought. But as if she could at last afford to feel it, a great contempt for him held her there at the window. Now that she was committed to this love, ready for ruin, she need no longer cling to kindness. Since he could break her body or her life in two for all she cared, she was damned if he couldn't fix an ice cap for himself.

Finally the commotion in the kitchen stopped and she heard him come back in and sit down. When she looked, he was leaning back in the armchair with a bulky clutch of ice cubes trickling out of one of her best napkins down his neck onto the chair. She pushed herself away from the window and went into the bath-

room, came back with a couple of towels, and swathed him in them. Her hands were rough on him, lifting his head, and when she finished she ran her hands down to his shoulders and something inside her took possession of them. Through the thin cotton of his shirt (he had taken his coat off) her hands pinched and twisted the flesh on his bony shoulders.

"What the hell?" he said in a voice that began with nothing but surprise and turned into a howl of pain. His free hand went up to one of hers; she shook him once roughly and let him go. "Rose, what the devil are you doing?" he said.

"I don't know." She went over and sank down on the sofa, turned from him, and buried her head on the arm. She half expected to cry but didn't.

She heard his voice talking, heard in it the patience and control which he had asserted over that first reaction of pain and surprise, before she listened to the words. (Patient with *me*, she thought, condescending to *me*. With all he owes me!) "Rose," he was saying, "you've got to tell me what's wrong. This can't go on. Why are you so angry at me?"

She shrugged, said nothing.

"Is it because I asked you to come with me? It must be. Why did that upset you so?"

She shrugged again.

"What you said about Ellen——"

That was the last straw. She looked up and cried impatiently, "Oh, don't go on and on about Ellen. Never mind about Ellen. I don't want to hear!"

Gregory only looked at her, but she could hear him thinking, with that same honest puzzlement that had infuriated her before. Then why did you ask me about her? Helplessly he looked at her. Helplessly she looked back. Then slowly, slowly, she could feel the wings of her anger begin to fold down around her. She began to remember; her mind began slowly to reproduce the familiar habits and patterns of yesterday and the day before. That was John over there and he looked to her for help, had come to her for healing. She had taken pride in that yesterday. Perhaps it was still possible to take some pride in it, to live from time to time as she had before, even though she knew that her pride was baseless and her living based on lies. Any living now would have to

be based on lies. The truth, which was this wordless anguish, this abyss of despair, was not anything in which one could live. "Tell me about Ellen, John," she said.

"I wish I could," he said, hardly glancing at her, galloping off on his sentences now that she had given him the chance. Yet she could not resent his self-absorption any more. With a kind of ironical understanding she saw that he was doing the very best he could to make the situation clear to her; that he believed that, once the situation was clear, everything would be taken care of. If she could just understand how he felt, she would make things right for him. But who had given him the right to be this selfish? I did, she thought. I did it myself.

"I don't know about Ellen," he was saying. "How can I make you understand? There's something unfinished between us——"

Just a small thing like a marriage, Rose thought.

"But it's entirely apart from you and me. I'm—I'm responsible for Ellen, Rose. As soon as I can, as soon as I've got a good enough grip on myself, I have to go and see her, see what she needs, if she's—well—all right. But that——"

"And suppose she isn't all right?"

"Why——" He sounded as if he hadn't really considered it before. And yet, if he hadn't, why was he worrying about her? "Why—I'd have to do what I could, of course."

"And what would I be doing in the meantime?"

"Rose, it doesn't have anything to *do* with you! Can't you see that?"

"I didn't say it did. I just wanted to know what you expect me to do while you fix her up." But it was no good. He would, of course, expect her to wait for him in Detroit—or wherever it was—as he had waited (she supposed) in Washington. First they would be together, and then when he felt strong enough he'd go off and Rose would slip down behind the rim of the horizon and float there in Limbo—until he came back. *If* he came back. Because she saw now, and grew cold seeing, that he wouldn't come back.

Now she was really frightened, not stunned with pain, not angry, but frightened. She felt herself standing on the edge of a precipice, the ground crumbling under her feet, and she, in nightmare horror, unable to draw back. Unable to save herself. Was

it true? Was she committed to destruction? He would leave her in something under six months. She was a step on the road to healing and wholeness for him. A necessary step that led to the next one—and the next one, obviously, was Ellen. He could not deal with Ellen until he had knowledge acquired from another woman to show him how. So he had come to Rose to acquire it because she had never denied him anything and had not now; and because he had no need to feel guilty before her, since he thought her strong enough, happy enough, to love him for a week—or for six months—and then cheerfully forget him. Once he was past this step he would never come back. *He* might not know it, but she had no such excuse. He had told her so himself.

And I love him, she thought, sitting like a marble statue, seeing the disaster that awaited her. It had nothing to do with her love at all. The love was the flaw in the marble, the crack, the stain that ran through the stone. It was a condition, like having red hair or a good memory, with which she now had to reckon. He will leave me now, she thought, if I don't go with him. In six months if I do.

But in six months he will break me to bits. Objectively, coldly, she looked at the eagerly speaking, mobile face across from her, trying to see why this should be so, why he should have this power. No clue. Nothing but the mystery itself to solve the mystery.

There was no malice in him. He would not break her by intention, but ignorantly. He would push her too hard there, lay too much on her here. As he had today. She had never thought to strike a man she loved as hard as she could, desiring nothing but to hurt him as much as possible. Anger and resentment and insecurity would come to live with her permanently; she would be fighting them all the time. There would soon be no quiet interludes like this in which she could draw breath and judge herself and her situation. Thus she herself would contribute to her destruction, driving him away sooner. For her battle within herself would distract her, would leave her no strength to give him the help he needed. He would grow puzzled and suspicious and then frightened. He must not be frightened; that was what he had come to her to mend. But she would not be able to teach him courage, because she would be frightened too.

She saw it very clearly but was so suspended in time that she

was astounded when she heard herself speak to him. And yet she did speak. The thing within her that wanted to live, the selfish passionate thing that knew greed had to come before giving, life before love, refused to yield. "I can't go with you, John," she heard herself say, cutting across some sentences of his. Her voice was weary, quite flat.

There was a silence. It was a while before she dared to look at him. He had plumped the ice cap down on the floor (a puddle was growing there), and he leaned forward, staring at her. She thought, Now he is trying to understand me with his brain, as he wanted me to understand him, and she gave him a half-smile of encouragement. "I see," he said, and blinked, not seeing. "It would be asking too much of you." His voice made this a question.

"That's right," she said.

"It would mean giving up your whole life for me."

"Yes."

"I can't ask you to do that. I see that. You're right."

You damn fool, she wanted to say, if I could do it, don't you think I would? Only you can't dispose of your whole life that way—you can't sacrifice it. It won't let you. Except for the Church, I suppose, and there there's the whole rule, the discipline, to sustain you, and people with you all the time doing the same thing.

"I've been very selfish," he said.

Oh God, she thought, now he's going to talk about that. "You haven't meant to be," she said in as dismissing a tone as she could, and went on quickly, "If you're through with the ice would you put it out in the kitchen?"

He jumped and picked up the messy little bundle. "Of course." He wandered across the room with it in his hand and stopped to look in the mirror over the bookcase. Well, that's that, Rose thought. It's over now. Her heart began to swell with shame and anger. It was over that simply; she'd spoken a word or two and it had all been taken care of.

"Hey," said Gregory at the mirror, "that was a hell of a clip you gave me." She looked up with as much surprise in her face as if he'd turned into someone else before her eyes. He grinned at her in the mirror.

She put her hand over her mouth because all she could think was that for six months she could have this, entertain this stranger in Gregory's body who was the one, perhaps, who had come to her last Sunday, not the lost boy with the wound—or they had both come; that might be more accurate. Then his face was gone from the mirror, he had gone into the kitchenette, and she leaned back, feeling her heart pounding as if she had escaped from danger.

But he came back. He came back and went across and put his hand on her shoulder, standing above her. "Is that what you really want, Rose?" he said. "Not to come with me?"

"I can't," said Rose in a whisper. This stranger, this was the new John, the whole man that he was groping toward. The man who *did* understand, who miraculously felt with her, who no longer studied her face in helpless puzzlement. This was the man that she might help to create over the next six months and who would then leave her to go to Ellen, for whom he was quite truly responsible. How could she stand to lose him, this one, *this* John? And I shall be six months weaker, she thought. I have got to make him go now if I'm to save myself at all. "I can't," she said again.

He didn't argue. "I can't stay here, you know. How bad will it be for you when I go?"

She licked her lips, wishing she could lie to him, but it was not possible. "I don't know."

"What will you think of it? How will you remember it?"

"How will you?" That was not humility, it was shame and she knew it.

He thought. "When I came in and you came across to me. How your mouth felt when I kissed you. And your body. You are the most beautiful and wonderful woman in the world. Always remember that."

But you don't say you love me, she thought. Yet beneath this she felt a wave of pleasure and startled warmth sweep over her, and that he did not love her became irrelevant. "Thank you," she said.

"Remember it," he said soberly. "How old are you, Rose?"

"Twenty-nine."

"You are meant to be happy," he said.

"Isn't everyone?" she said, clutching at her irony. "Don't tell me to marry someone else, John."

"What shall I tell you, then?"

"Don't tell me anything." She leaned back on the sofa, felt his body settle beside hers. "The less we talk, the better," she said. Don't make me say it, she was wishing, don't make me say that I love you and that you don't love me. I know what you are doing. You are healing me. It is what I was supposed to do for you. You are going to make me happier. I don't want to be happier; I must hold onto the broken-backed chaos of truth—— But she could not stop him. He was stronger than she was now. He is drawing a picture that he can leave with me without feeling too guilty, she told herself, stabbed with the thought that he was making her happier only for his own sake, his own peace of mind. But even this last bitterness could not seal her ears to his words.

"I won't talk much," he said. "I'll only say it once, but I have to be sure you do understand and will remember. Will you remember that you are everything in the world I ever wanted or needed? Will you remember that if I were able to, I would make a whole new world built around you, and a better world than this? You will be something in my life always, a limit. When someone is kind, someone is gentle and good and funny all at once, I'll think, Yes, she's forty per cent as nice as Rose, or twenty per cent as nice as Rose——"

He was succeeding, he was comforting her. "Don't," she said, turning her head away. "You'll make me cry. I've done nothing but cry all day."

"Socking me in the nose was nothing?"

And incredibly she was able to joke about it too. "Oh dear," she said, "I hoped you'd forgotten."

"Not quite." Now his arm tightened around her, he lifted and shifted her a little and she began to tremble. "You see," he said "I can't kiss you because I can't breathe through my nose."

"It serves me right," said Rose.

Afterward that was one of the times that Rose remembered best when she was happy. But it was not the end. That night (or was it the next night? Or even two nights later? She never remem-

bered surely) ; but on the bad night, whenever it was, they paid for the kindness and comfort they had achieved. Tormented and hopeless, she clung to him, telling him again and again that he did not love her, crying out that he was leaving her—"Oh, you're going, you're going!"

"Then come with me, Rose, come with me," was all that he could say, and it was not enough.

Though once she did answer, "All right, all right, I will, I'll have to," only to turn from him in a storm of tears, asking him what he took her for, what he was determined to make of her. "How can I come when you don't love me?" she asked.

"But I do, I do," he said wearily.

"No, you don't. Don't be silly. Do you think I'm a fool? Of course you don't love me." She waited on the indrawn breath. "Well? Do you?"

And then, Now I've done it, she thought, now I've really done it.

For he rolled away from her, from her clutching hands, sat up on the edge of the bed. "Oh, John——" she began in terror. Then he stood up, was really gone, and she lay back, unable even to cry, her mouth dry, her heart pounding.

He had gone over to the window. It was open and the wind was cold, but he did not notice it. Memory and hate were tugging at him, swirling around him as they had that first morning; but now Rose had provoked them, let them loose on him. I must get away, he thought; it was the only coherent thing he was able to think. Leaving her would be—not deprivation—but escape.

Escape from love to loneliness. Back to the arc of flight. Clean and cold, the wind poured around his body; it made him shiver, but at the same time it washed off the touch of Rose's clinging hands. What did he owe her, after all? Had he asked her to love him? Had he said a word to her, lifted a finger? Had he even asked to be healed?

Healing was her business. Why should she cry now? That first night he had come, she had stood in the center of the lighted room with all healing in her hands; the old, old dream symbol, the figure of comfort in the lighted cave—woman, healing, rest. For thousands of years men had dreamed their women into this. But he could not stay in the cave, he had to go on. Every man had

his journey to make, and the cave was not the end of the journey, but only a recurrent resting place; a device for sleep; an illusion that persuaded and soothed that dangerous enemy, the mind, reduced it to drifting impotence so that the body could rest and gain strength to travel farther.

But she did not want him to travel. She wanted to trap him in the cave. In return for the animal warmth and comfort of this past week, she was actually bargaining for his love! And he shuddered with cold and anger at the woman's bargain, seeing it so clearly through the lenses of fury and hate: love me and I will comfort you and sustain you. How cheap can I buy your love? With my body? With woman's traditional skill (so easily discarded) in house and kitchen? With children whom I shall name and rear and teach to hate you, so that they, too, must be bought with love? With a mind that schools itself to follow yours cleverly, hiding the eternal dark female laughter and negation underneath learned logic, acquired culture? Will this buy your love? For without it you will have nothing, nothing but tears and agony.

And to love costs so much, more than he had to pay. He had never been able to pay it all to Ellen—nor she to him. So they had hurt each other to cut down the debt.

Like a stroke of lightning through his brain—he could see it moving across the dark from left to right like a round flash of brilliance—he thought, Have I taught that to Rose? Is that what I have taught her? Then it was gone.

She struggled up on the bed. "John—John?" she said thickly through the dark, and he knew the words were being squeezed out of her by torment. "I can't stand this. You must help me. There must be something I can do. It can't be—— It can't be——" And then with a wail, "But it is! It is! It is! Oh God, oh Jesus, help me!"

"Rose," he said—no one could have refused to answer—and she caught her breath and was quiet. But he did not know what to say next. She wanted comfort and he had none to give her. The heavy silence in the room seemed to be in his head, not outside.

"What is it, John?" said Rose's voice, heavy with weeping, and yet in that minute no longer hysterical, but composed, resigned. "You must be freezing."

He shuddered again as she spoke, feeling the cold as cold, as pain, for the first time. Slowly he went over to the bed but did not lie down. He sat on the edge, naked still in the cutting wind; his hands found her shoulders. "Don't you know," he said, "that I can't love anybody?"

She lay quiet between his hands for a minute. Then he heard her say in argument just one word—"Timmy."

He laughed and shook her a little. "No. Don't you know about that? I killed Timmy. That's what Ellen said."

"How could you have killed Timmy?" He listened very carefully to her voice to see whether she thought he was crazy, whether she was humoring him. But she only sounded tired. "He was overseas," she said reasonably.

He shook her again. "Don't be stupid. She meant that I could have kept him out of service or got him transferred somewhere safe, kept him home."

"Could you have?" asked Rose.

Trust Rose, he thought, to be the only one to ask him the relevant question. Ellen had assumed he could have, because she wanted to believe it. Cap, unaware of the power Gregory had held in Washington, had not dreamed of asking, had expected him to bear no more than the normal human guilt—which was all that he could bear then. But Rose had asked him for the truth, for the narrow, implacable edge of the blade.

"Yes," he said, "I think I probably could have. For a while at any rate." He looked down at where Rose's face must be. "Why, then I did kill him," he said. There was a long silence.

"Get into bed," said Rose. "You're freezing."

He did as he was told, stretched out beside her, felt the warmth of her body and the bed begin to release his tense muscles, and shivered worse—uncontrollably.

"You don't know"—Rose's voice took up the task of healing; "that Timmy would have let you interfere with him. Perhaps if you'd tried to have him transferred he would have volunteered for service overseas anyway."

"What's the sense of arguing?" he said. "What difference can any of it make now?" But he began to argue at once. "He did tell me not to interfere with him, but that has nothing to do with it. There was a boy drafted with him, someone's son, some congress-

man's. His father pulled strings. I asked Tim about OCS around then— God help me, it was all I thought of. He nearly chewed my head off."

"Well, then," said Rose, "doesn't that answer it?" She didn't touch him. She just lay there next to him, suggesting, not insisting upon, the possibility of comfort.

"No. Of course not. I could have managed something without telling him if I'd been smart."

"I doubt it," said Rose. "Timmy wasn't a dope."

"But if I'd been *really* smart— Or if I'd worried about it and cared, the way Ellen did, I might have managed something. And how do you know about Timmy? Maybe in a pinch he'd have let me get away with it. After all this, all this year, I know courage isn't anything simple. You can't make it as easy as that it's brave to go overseas and cowardly to stay home. A man's got to cut his coat to fit his cloth. How can I say what Timmy would have done in a situation that I never let come up? He was killed. I've got to weigh everything against that. Would a little temporary humiliation have been worse than that? That's all there could have been. And I wouldn't risk it. Because——"

"But it wouldn't have been just that for Timmy! If he'd let you save him he would have had to admit to himself that he was a coward. Or else——"

"Maybe he was. Did you ever think of that? Ellen would have loved him anyway. I couldn't face the idea. That's really why I didn't do anything. I couldn't face having a son who was a coward, who might let me get away with helping him. I was a coward about that, I mean, as well as about other things—about what people would think if I did try to get Timmy somewhere safe. I never thought about Timmy. Only myself."

"You still are. Do you seriously think Timmy was a coward? Your son?"

"If he were just *my* son I'd know he was. But he was Ellen's son too. And yet, I don't know. Ellen is driven too, Rose. She *has* to be brave. She runs into courage as if she were escaping from something——"

"Yes, all right. Well, let *me* tell you, then. I didn't know him very well, but I'll tell you about Timmy. He was much simpler than you think. He was young and everything was—was all in

one piece. Absolute, I guess I mean. I don't know whether he might have grown up into some kind of a coward. Isn't that what growing up is? Maybe at the end, over there in France and Belgium, he would have been willing to let you pull him out. I don't know what had happened to him, so I can't tell. Well, you couldn't have done it then. Could you? Even you? You couldn't have yanked him back home from the front."

He was silent. So she went on doggedly. "But I'll tell you this. He wouldn't have let you touch him before that. Maybe your reasons were wrong, John. Let's forget that you thought it was right for Timmy to serve his country—you did think so, and so did Timmy, you know. Let's make it as personal as you want. Let's say you should have thought about Timmy just as your son, not as a young man in wartime like ten million other young men. Still what you did was right—right for Timmy. If you'd interfered with him, you'd have destroyed his pride."

"He was only a kid. You said so yourself. I could have fixed it without his knowing."

"He would have found out later."

"What difference would that have made, if he'd been alive to find out? You're not being honest, Rose. You're trying to make me feel better, instead of thinking of Timmy. You keep forgetting he's dead, Rose. I don't forget it. I tried to."

"But you forget everything else." The argument, begun only to comfort him, was absorbing her now. "If you'd taken Timmy's pride—— Do you think *any* kind of life is better than death?" She rubbed her forehead distractedly. I'm so tired, she thought, I'm tired. But she was waiting for his answer as if her life depended on it.

"I don't see how you can think anything else," he said. "Since we know nothing about death, we *must* think life is better. Yes. Any kind of life."

"Pride," she said. "Honor——"

"Words," said Gregory beside her. He turned over heavily in the bed.

"They're all we have to think with," said Rose. "Or to live by."

"Then they're not good enough."

That's true, anyway, thought Rose dryly. Haven't I tried to tell you what I'm feeling? And there are no words. You're worrying

about Timmy, your responsibility before last, and my heart is breaking. No, let's be accurate. Let's make the words as good as we can. That's not what it feels like at all. It's more as if the soles of my feet were attached to a pump, a pain pump. She remembered vaguely the anesthesia machine she had lain under once when they had taken out her appendix. Something like that. Only for pain instead of not-pain. And it pumps up through the soles of my feet, up, up, up to my chest, and then a wave of dizziness—not the same thing, not pain, but a result of the too-much-pain in my veins, like being drunk or half suffocated with carbon monoxide—comes up from there into my brain. And keeps it from working. Pushes the gears and the wheels out of line so that one thing buzzes and buzzes around and won't stop, and another that ought to connect never moves. Then the pain goes down, down, down, and the dizziness goes down, down, and I'm very cold and sane again so that I can see that I am quite right to be experiencing this pain, it's entirely justified. And that lasts till the pump starts again and it starts coming up again.

It was going to start now. She was going to weep again and cry out hysterically against the man next to her. I will not do it, she thought, and took a piece of the sheet between her teeth. She shut her eyes and lay there, locking her jaws on the wad of disgusting wet linen until the crisis passed. But I can't live like this, she said to herself. This can't be allowed to continue.

"Will you go away, please?" she said.

There was a pause before he answered, and his voice when it came was heavy. She realized that she had waked him and that she had no idea how long she had lain in her agony. She opened her eyes and saw that the dark was graying. It was morning.

"What?" said Gregory. "What'd you say?"

"Go away today," said Rose. "This morning."

He took a minute to register the words; then said, "All right," in a kind of docile grunt, turned over, pulled her closer to him, and went to sleep again. She lay uncomfortably with her head on his shoulder. After a while she had an impulse to laugh at the whole impossible situation. Dear Dorothy Dix, she thought, I am madly in love with a man who is married, crazy, and unemployed. He is sixteen years older than I am and of a different religion. If any. I have decided to break with him, but when I

told him so, he said all right and went back to sleep. What shall I do? Signed, Anxious.

Dear Anxious. Tickle him. Dear Anxious. Tickle him, pickle him, fickle him, sickle him, stickle him, hickle—no, that's heckle—him, lickle, mickle, rickle— She was asleep herself; as the cold gray light of the end of the world, of all final waking, grew into what we arise to every day. Exhausted, they slept in each other's arms this last time as innocently as the lost children in the wood, so that it was nearly noon when he went, for they had slept into midmorning.

She closed the door behind him and stood alone in the living room, looking about it as if for some clue as to what had happened to her. And (overstrained, aching to sleep again and unable to, having drunk half a pot of bitter, badly made coffee) it came to her with every aspect of truth that the whole experience was incredible. This had never happened, she had not seen John for a year, and her closest contact with him was the photograph she had stolen and hidden, so long ago, in her bureau drawer. She had shut the door because she did not want to hear his footsteps going away from her down the stairs. But now it seemed to her that if she pulled the door open she would hear nothing, there was no one on the stairs. The shut door was a waking precaution against a dream danger. Even when, faintly, she heard the crash of the heavy outside door closing, it was meaningless. It's over, he's gone, she told herself, reaching back for last night's terrible pain, frightened by her emptiness, wanting to feel something, even agony. But the words did not make sense.

But what does make sense? she thought, looking around the shabby living room for a clue. Yes, this was where she lived, she and Katie. But no! Katie was gone! And Rose realized with a terrible pang of guilt that she had left Katie's clothes and all the wedding presents half packed and bundled into the hall closet for almost a week. Oh no! she thought. Oh, how could I! So while Gregory walked down the street to the trolley stop, Rose huddled on the floor by the closet, crying and crying into Katie's bright tumbled blouses that had hung, ready for packing, in the living room the night Gregory walked in.

CHAPTER 13

In northern Connecticut, November is a season by itself. The drama of growth is over, burned out in October's fires. Now before the hush of the snow there is a wait of six or eight weeks. The air is very clear. There is frost at night, but lawns stay green. The hills and fields seem drab at first until, as the eye grows skilled in looking, the various shades of gray and dun spread out across the spectrum and fill it as completely and more subtly than the lush green of summer. You can see very far on these days, things seem very clear; every detail of the house three miles away on the next hill stands out. And there is a sense of things revealing themselves. The outlines of buildings emerge from their summer screen of growth, the fringe of trees on the hills becomes translucent. This is how high we are, say the hills, no higher, though the tops of our maples ride seventy feet above us and lend us their stature all summer long. Look well, say the hills and the trees and the gray outcroppings of rock, the stone walls and the fallow fields, the houses and barns; look well, this is the time when you can see most, between the delirium of summer and the enchantment of the snow.

For Ellen there began that month a complicated evolution. For the first time since last April when John had left her, she looked beyond herself and saw reality. It was hateful, it was infuriating, but if she wanted revenge upon the world, she would have to come to some kind of terms with it. The nurse would have to go, she must begin to look after herself. So little by little her will conquered her nerves, and to the delight of her family she grew perceptibly better.

Perceptibly better. But imperceptibly worse.

The weeks of clear light, of focusing and polarizing, passed and winter came again, muffling the landscape with its grotesques of

snow, isolating beauty in little patches here and there—a birch grove, white on white; the knife edge of one drift at the corner of the wall. November was ecumenical, sad, and human. Winter exploded life into fragments, household by household huddling together, barn by barn. It was out of the long New England winter that Ellen had fled last year, back to her husband. Now it was winter again, but she would no longer flee. Never again would she do what she had done last year when she had gone back to John, to the author of her son's death, with that death clear before her and her accusation already spoken. She had, last year, denied her denial of him; but not out of courage. Out of cowardice. It had seemed to her last year that she must try to go on living. The decision had been wrong, she believed now, for her life had not been viable. It had broken down.

She was very clear now that it was not necessary to live.

This decision restored her health. It was a constant relief, a constant relaxation. The muscles of her mind which had locked in spasm remained in spasm; but the others, the muscles trying desperately to unlock their knotted brothers, these could relax. The struggle was over. The spasm had become a permanent crippling; the crippling a cage. Since life was not worth living, since it was meaningless, it was as easy to live it as not. There was really very little difference.

The one trouble her crippling caused Ellen was over Timmy. Timmy was the only avenue into her now, and it was, of course, a *via dolorosa*, an avenue of pain. It was evident to her that John had deceived her and that Timmy was alive. It was necessary that this be evident, for without its clarity John could not be the total, the entire, deceiver and source of her ruin. And he was. She knew he was. And yet she knew that he had killed Timmy. But the contradiction did not bother her because she did not think the two things at the same time. It was simply that her mind had draped about John two different mythologies; he bore two sets of epithets, like so many before him, like Siva, who is healer and destroyer, like Zeus himself. There was John the destroyer in the black aspect, in the dark of the moon. And there was John the deceiver when the moon waxed and its lying light simulated the decent clearness of the sun. John with the sword, John with the snake's tongue—he *must* become his opposite in her mind, since

the thought of him encircled her and she reached him by whatever road she took, north or south, east or west. Reached him, shrank back (a reflex now, she was not conscious of it), and so walked warily about the center of the cell in which he walled her.

For a long time, though, she told no one of her conviction that Timmy was alive. The road out of her cage through the thought of Timmy was a narrow and turbulent passage up through overhanging walls of rock where one had to breast the full current of a mountain stream. In the dark. Under tons of stone. Stumbling over hidden boulders, flung against treacherous outcroppings, no foothold secure. The memories of Timmy which led to the daydreams of Timmy, these could be enjoyed within the cell, she became adept at them. But to speak of them? She was afraid. She had looked at her brother once, one evening when they happened to be alone, just she and Jim, and the closeness, the quiet, the comfort of the fire and the familiar unchanging room had almost trapped her into confidence. Then from somewhere behind her a voice she could not recognize said, "A clever detective could find him in twenty-four hours." She almost screamed with fright. Was that what John was about to do? Track him down, mark him for death again? She did not dare think again of where he might be, Timmy, in the world which included this room and Jim and the fire, lest the movement of the intention in her mind should be subtly transmitted to John, lest he should remember Timmy living, a murder not fulfilled, and move to kill.

But her silence indicated to Ellen's relations only that she was greatly improved. The nurse left before Christmas. Ellen had returned, it appeared, to the situation of last summer. She moved about the house with a magazine in her hand; she arranged—not flowers now—but boughs of holly and pine and fir. She forced narcissus and hyacinth and tulips in a sunny window in the dining room. It was true that Marion frequently had to remember to water them for her, and that she occasionally left a vase half filled and wandered off. But after all—it was natural enough. She never read the papers, but then no one could remember that she had, particularly, after she left to get married, except for a day or two when she was expecting John to arrive those summers that she had spent at home. And now, since John was not coming, why should she read the papers?

Only Mrs. Talcott seemed to sense some change. She looked at Ellen a good deal, but she never asked her anything about her marriage now, or made any more suggestions for its formal termination. She seemed to regard Ellen as having returned legally as well as in fact to the exact status of twenty-five years ago, a husbandless daughter living at home. But Mrs. Talcott, after all, was now eighty-one, and coherence had never been her forte. Perhaps she had, in all simplicity, forgotten that Ellen had ever been away.

Eight hundred miles west, during these months, Gregory was becoming a workingman on the night shift in a Detroit factory. It was not one of the huge ones but a smaller parts plant. He was lucky to get a job because the strike at General Motors that winter laid off two hundred thousand men and slowed production. Statistically speaking, he shouldn't have got a job in Detroit at all, but he managed to slide in through a loophole two weeks before the strike started and go to work at a place which supplied Chrysler instead of GM.

The strike began at Thanksgiving and ran inexorably through the darkest part of the year. Since the plant where Gregory worked had a union shop, he had automatically joined on going to work without thinking much about it. It had, if anything, amused him a little, pleased him a little, for purely personal reasons—because it was the badge of being really a workingman to hold a union card that meant something, that you had earned yourself. He'd never done it before, though among the scraps of cardboard which he had left behind on his desk in Washington last spring had been a couple that called him a union member—an honorary member.

But there was nothing honorary about this, or about the big shiny machine that had crouched and glared at him for the first week or so, until he had conquered it and learned to live with it casually. And after a while it began to be not at all amusing that he was a workingman, but just taken-for-granted fundamental. Greasy coveralls and a sweaty peaked cap on the back of his head, a day's work that started at four-thirty and ended at one in the morning, the cafeteria stews he ate at nine o'clock for dinner, if you could call that meal any usual word at all—these became

routine. The long bus ride out to the plant through the end-of-the-afternoon sunlight, cold as steel, and back through the black windy dark, these were the excursions that framed his day and held it together. Incredibly, repetition led him, hardly thinking, out of the plant, past the guarded entrance, through the gate in the wire fence, rolled and tumbled along with the tide of other men going home, so numerous as to be anonymous. Under driving clouds or a high pale floodlight of a moon, they pushed toward the busses, the first standing under the harsh street lamp, the rest diminishing down the street in the frozen darkness. The first filled. Over the pavement first broken, then ice-hummocked, the river of men poured down into the darkness, the bus drivers put on their lights. By the third or fourth bus Gregory was generally aboard. His seat mate might doze or read a paper which he had kept, folded small, in the pocket of his jacket all day, often a paper in Polish or in a language whose letters, even, were strange, the alphabet itself stretched to include nameless shapes. Or Gregory would be sitting in the center of a group who knew each other and shouted incomprehensible insults back and forth.

That should have made him lonely, if anything could, but he was not lonely, though for weeks he was almost alone. He had found a furnished room over a grocery store—clean enough, though always smelling a little sour, with a hard bed and rickety furniture, but adequate for his needs. It was a place to sleep and to leave his things. That was all he wanted. He got up around ten o'clock and made coffee on a two-burner electric stove, ate an orange or an apple and a piece of (frequently) stale pastry of some kind. Then he went out. He explored the city under the pale cloudy snow-sky of December or the high thin blue of a sunny day in January. He went to museums and movies, bars and restaurants, looking, listening, making a map in his mind—but not of the city alone. Of himself too.

It would be hard to say that anything in particular happened to him that winter—there was nothing dramatic at all. After a while he made some friends. He got to eating his dinner with the same three or four men at night, and listening to their talk. This dealt for about two parts with the minutiae of their jobs, for about one part with women, and one part with sports. Gregory didn't talk much at first, but he began to follow the sports pages

in the papers until he could talk as well as anyone about fighters and hockey players and the switches and changes in the major-league baseball teams as they reconstituted themselves after the lean years of the war. He went to a fight one night with two of his cronies and enjoyed it—the talk and the smoky atmosphere and the beautifully related action of the two men in the ring, better than any dancing he had ever seen because it was all purpose and all improvised. Afterward they went to a place that had girls, and that he didn't enjoy, for the thing was meaningless, senseless, useless, without intimacy (not that he wanted intimacy), but he went through with it and felt himself better accepted after that. He had done what they all did, in their way, and so the different way he talked from them (though not much) and the uncertainty of some of his reactions became less important. And he found, being part of a group, that it was easier than being alone. It cut down the area of choice, which was a blessing. Who wants always to have to choose which table to sit at in a cafeteria every night? Or to whom to say hello? Now he sat with his friends in a corner, and companionship was taken care of.

Also, he got to know the people in whose house he lived. It was a private family, not a boardinghouse. The room they rented him had belonged to two of the sons, one married now and living in Flint, one gone west to California. Their name was Novak. Mr. Novak owned the grocery store downstairs. He was a round, rather stooped little man who wore a straw hat and an out-at-elbows brown sweater in the store, discarding the hat when he came upstairs to the living quarters. His wife was equally round and extremely silent. Then there was Sophie, the unmarried daughter, who flung out of the house every morning, returning as late as she could at night, and Charles, who was still in school and consequently was harnessed to the store afternoons as his father's unwilling apprentice. It took Gregory well over a month to notice anything about the family beyond their variations on the expression of sullenness, and even then they became for him merely a classic interpretation of the conflict between Americanized children and immigrant parents. They were not people at all for him, only symbols, until almost Christmas time.

That was when he found them one Sunday noon all together in the kitchen. He'd gone in to pay Mrs. Novak his room rent. They

were sitting about the round table covered with a white cloth—not eating, not talking, just sitting. Gregory hesitated in the doorway. Usually Mrs. Novak came over from the stove or the sink at once in a kind of silent agitation of motion which approximated a bustle, took his money, smiled, and went back to her work. Today she was not working. The Novak family might have been caught somehow by a nearby enchantment such as launched the Sleeping Beauty's scullions and dairymaids and stewards into a dream convoy a hundred years long. Then Gregory saw that Mr. Novak, rotund, sausage-and-strudel-filled Mr. Novak, was crying. He perceived with a jolt that the Novaks were no mere concomitants of someone else's dream, no dim tapestry-worked background to a hero's adventures. They were as human and as anguished as—*as Ellen.* (He did not think of himself, perhaps because he was not anguished. But why should he have thought Ellen instead of Rose, whom he had left weeping and mourning two months before? Yet it was Ellen who came to his mind as a symbol of legendary, of epic suffering, not Rose.)

"What's the matter, Mr. Novak?" he asked. "Are you in trouble?" He thought later that it was an extraordinary thing for him to have done, to have walked in, up to the table, to have asked Mr. Novak to share his burden. If, a year ago, he had been confronted with a man weeping in the bosom of his family, he would surely have backed hastily out, muttering an apology.

Mr. Novak shook his head slowly—so slowly that Gregory perceived he was not saying no. His trouble apparently was so great that it had infected his view of the world, until it was impossible for the poor man to make any kind of affirmation at all—he could say yes to Gregory's question only by a gesture of negation.

Gregory looked from him to Mrs. Novak, who said "Aie!" and pushed her plump cheek with her fingers; his eyes went on to Sophie.

It was Sophie who was embarrassed, if anyone was. "Don't cry, Pa," she said, but she did not insist on it. "It's the store," she explained to Gregory.

"Aie!" said Mrs. Novak.

"What's the matter with the store?" asked Gregory.

"The strike," said Sophie tonelessly. "No one has any money. Everyone wants credit."

"Hundreds of customers!" said Mr. Novak. "New, old—with money they go to the Supermarket. For credit they come to me. What can I do?"

"You give them too much, you're too easy," said Sophie.

"And if I don't?" Mr. Novak cast one hand palm up on the table. "Then they all go to the Supermarket."

"They can't get credit there," said Charles.

"Later, later," said Mr. Novak furiously. "Do I think only about now? I think about next year, about ten years, when you are a man."

"I don't want the store," said Charles. "I'm going to be a pilot."

"Aie!" said Mrs. Novak on a new note, which Gregory guessed to be that of maternal, rather than wifely, concern.

"Pilot!" said Mr. Novak. "All right. Be a pilot. Go ahead, break your neck. There won't be any store anyway after January."

"What happens in January?" asked Gregory.

But Mr. Novak just shrugged.

"He has to pay the bank eight hundred and thirty-five dollars," said Sophie timidly.

"The bank. The jobbers. The wholesalers," said Mr. Novak in despair. "Who gives *me* credit? Perhaps I should go to the Supermarket too!"

"I have four hundred dollars saved," said Gregory. "If that would do any good. And I could endorse your note for the rest, if the bank wanted."

The whole Novak family rose to its feet at once, not even pausing to register surprise. The table rose with them for an inch or two, and Gregory had a vision of its suddenly taking flight on nothing but the wings of common emotion. Mrs. Novak was actually talking, though not in English; tears rolled down her cheeks and she took Gregory by the shoulders and kissed him under his chin—it was as high as she could reach.

Charles was saying, "Oh gee!"

Sophie was saying, "You can't do that, Pa, you can't let him! You can't do that, Mr. Gregory!"

Mr. Novak said, "Hush!" and everybody hushed. He looked at Gregory, took a deep breath, and suddenly exhaled it and sat

down again. "Sophie's right," he said. "I can't take it. The store is going broke anyway."

"I don't care," said Gregory.

Mr. Novak stared at him. His eyes narrowed and his voice roughened. "What's the matter?" he said. "You must care. Are you crazy? 'I don't care,' he says."

Gregory felt like a fool. He had no right to insult Mr. Novak by saying that four hundred dollars didn't matter. It mattered desperately to Mr. Novak. "I mean I don't need it now," he said weakly. "I'd—I'd like to invest it with you."

"Hmm," said Mr. Novak. "Some investment. A two-by-four grocery business halfway broke even in good times—— What is it? Is it Sophie? You want Sophie?" He stood up again and turned on his daughter in their own furious spitting language.

Sophie spat back. She glanced at Gregory for a second—looking, he believed, to see if he did want her. But she finished in English, "You goddamn fool, Pa! Don't be such an idiot! I don't care if you take it or not, I told you not to! But don't be such a fool!"

"Aagh!" said Mr. Novak, collapsing, and put his head in his hands.

Mrs. Novak leaned over her husband and shook his shoulder. The prospect of losing this chance for salvation actually spurred her to speak English. "Look," she said, motioning at Gregory. "Look, he's a nice man," and she beamed at him in what was really a desperate appeal. "That's all, he's kind, he's a nice man."

"Oh, for God's sake!" said Gregory. "Look, Mr. Novak. It's this simple. You need it. I don't. If you take it, you have a chance to save the store and go on living here and finish bringing up Charles and——"

"And get old and die here," said Mr. Novak gloomily.

"All right, get old and die here. You have to do it somewhere. Compared to how important the money is for you, it really doesn't matter to me. It would have last year, maybe. Maybe it will next year. Right now it doesn't make a goddamn bit of difference to me if I have four hundred dollars in the bank or ten. Look, Mr. Novak. You came here from Europe——"

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Novak, nodding.

"Where from?"

"Przemysl," said Mr. Novak, but as Gregory had never heard anyone pronounce the name of this city before, he was not much the wiser.

He went on, however. "And everything was very different here from there, wasn't it?"

"Like two lives," said Mr. Novak. "You don't have to talk so simple. I know what you mean. It was two lives. Sometimes I think I should have two souls and rise twice on Judgment Day. Only I don't believe, so I don't have to bother about that."

"Well, I'm between two lives," said Gregory. The sweat stood out on his forehead suddenly and he wiped it off with the back of his hand. "Like you when you were on the boat. What good is money to me?"

"Yes," said Mr. Novak. His eyes were turned back forty years. "It was a cattle boat," he said. "A pigsty. But the gambling—no one cared about money. You're right. Only the smart ones, the very smart ones. I heard someone say one man won ten thousand dollars on that trip." He sighed. "But the money will mean something next year to you. That smart man took ten thousand dollars off the ship and used it."

Gregory said, "To have helped you will be more useful to me."

Sophie looked puzzled and Mrs. Novak had long since been unable to follow the English. Mr. Novak gazed steadily at Gregory.

"I would like to know that the store is still going on because of me," said Gregory. "It will be something to remember later. It will make me realize and remember what it was like to be here, how I did something that affected other people."

"Perhaps I will cheat you," said Mr. Novak. "I could. You don't know anything about me."

Gregory grinned. "Then I would know that you had cheated me, wouldn't I? I don't want gratitude, you know. I want"—he waved one hand—"a monument."

"Perhaps I'll go broke anyway," said Mr. Novak.

"Well, you've got to take a chance sometime," said Gregory. "Do you want me to go to the bank with you tomorrow?"

Mr. Novak continued to gaze at him for a minute or two. Then he sighed and ducked his round head and rubbed it hard. "It's better than sitting here and crying," he said.

So Gregory became a member of the Novak household. Mrs. Novak fed him now; no longer did he breakfast on bitter coffee and stale pastry. He insisted on paying her two dollars a week more for breakfasts, but she would take nothing extra for what she gave him at night. She merely left food out for him for a day or two, but when he did not eat it all, she took to staying up for him. Gregory ate potato pancakes and warmed-up stuffed cabbage at two in the morning, whether he wanted them or not, and wondered when he would develop ulcers. Christmas came, a dark Christmas with a meager little tree that sat on the kitchen table, and presents wrapped in tissue paper. Sophie bought Gregory a hand-painted tie and, horrified that he had forgotten all about it, he took Charles out the next morning and got him a pair of ice skates.

The strike went on, and Mr. Novak held off the bank but grew thinner (the skin sagging into worry lines on his face) as he squirmed past creditor after creditor. The year grew darker, the cold set hard, and all over the city you could feel the tension of the strike harden too. We will break you, said the men who ran the company. We will not be broken, said the men who ran the machines. Through January and February, through the repetition of the conferences, through the mediation, through the report of the President's board, the cleavage was as simple as that. Other arguments had precipitated the strike, and they were still discussed in the newspapers and occasionally even at the mediation conferences, but they were not part of the emotional content of the strike. We will not be broken, said the men, and they were not. They ended by getting only about half the raise they had asked for, and they lost more in wages by striking than the raise would give them in two years. Why, then, did they stay out for four months of that bitter winter? Because they would not be broken.

After the last war, Gregory remembered, the big pattern-making strike had been in steel. That had been for money, too, ostensibly, but it had not *really* been, any more than this strike was. Both of them were tests, tests of whether the power labor had gained during the war could be kept, of the amount of control the men who ran the machines could exercise over the economy. The steel strike had been broken. The economy of the twenties

acknowledged no control by labor. But whatever might happen in the forties and fifties (and the Taft-Hartley Act happened within two years), the strike at General Motors ensured that the country could not operate without dealing with labor. That might be a good thing, it might at times be a bad thing. But it was a fact that all politicians, all statesmen, all businessmen would have to reckon with from now on.

In Gregory's mind, of course, there was no doubt that it was a good thing. By the time the strike ended he was committed. Yet it was not just because he worked with his hands that he felt proud of labor's strength. There were more than motor habits involved. He believed profoundly that the men he worked with must have some control over the things they made and the country they made them in. They were ignorant men, most of them—not all. Some of them were stupid men, though not many. But Gregory thought that in one way they were more fitted to help govern America than almost anyone he had known in Washington. For they had one great quality that had leaked out of Washington quickly, no matter how constantly renewed. They had responsibility. They were up against it. There wasn't any protective layer at all between them and the worst possible things that could happen to people and to families. They knew all about them, and the knowledge gave them strength and their own kind of dignity. Far from being robots, mechanical "little people" pushed around by statistical trends, yielding their deepest intentions to "market research," these were the people who had most constantly to exercise their wills, to make a continual choice. Every day they must decide again that making a living, bearing children, growing up and marrying in America were things worth doing. There were no vacations for them, no ancestral homes to retreat to, no two thousand dollars in the bank with which to flee to Florida. The fact that their daily decision was made not in contemplation but in action was the motive power of America.

Since their decision was action, their negative decision was not to act. To strike. Since America is an industrial country, the strike is seen as an industrial weapon. But it is no different from food hoarding by peasants, from the quiet drifting away of starved troops from a hopeless siege line. This is not revolution nor mutiny, though it is often called so. It is the only statement which

can be made by people whose decision is action that their situation is no longer bearable. They refuse to bear it.

So for laboring men, the great symbolic weapon is to stop doing the things the country depends on their doing. Violence is not their strength, and they use it very seldom, even when it is used against them. They do not use it, in fact, unless their view of reality has been clouded by some prejudice or ideology—by belief in communism or white supremacy or some other obsessive fantasy which changes actual events and pressures into symbols of terror and apocalyptic change. The normal violence of America is personal violence and, having no ideological justification, is sordid and incomprehensible—the raped and slaughtered child, the “love nest” murder. It is a long time since aristocratic honor has influenced enough of America to make the code duello and the feud a part of actual life.

Decision in action—intuitive, relatively simple. It was into this pattern that Gregory tried to live himself that winter. It could not be done by taking thought, by objective study. It had to be done by listening and feeling together with the men he worked beside, with the Novaks. Always, always, he had felt cut off from the world. First it had been his own frightened withdrawal that did it—the terror of his mother’s fury, the shame he had felt for himself and his father over the betrayal of his grandfather, his friend. Then shame had been glossed over into a fastidious rejection of middle-class averageness at college. And then, when he had begun at last to feel how confined was the prison his attitudes had built for him, then there had been Ellen—the fire at the heart of his solitude. No earthly fire it had seemed, warming and searing at once, but a magical flame, renewing and torturing and never, never to be put out. And around him again, Ellen’s money had been another wall cutting him off from any experience but the strange, impassioned, tortuous, nameless emotions of his marriage until at last he had no longer dared to experience these, had rejected Ellen, too, shut himself behind the last wall.

You had to get out, Rose had said to him, and you didn’t know any way to do it except to make it impossible for yourself to stay. Yes. But it had been fear that drove him. Necessity had worn the mask of fear. The great man had died, the man to whom he had dedicated his life, and who had therefore been his excuse for hav-

ing nothing else to do with that life. Nothing. Nothing left at all—blank negation behind the labyrinth of walls. No wonder he had seemed slightly mad when he broke out of them—and he did, to himself, looking back, remembering that haunted trip to Florida, flight and pursuit both; or the fatality with which he had found a villain in his first friend. He had certainly been acting out some secret drama in that situation. What was it? I am betrayed, was that it? No, that was not the emotion he had felt, astonished rage at betrayal. It was more complicated. He had been frightened, paralyzed with fright, seeking for justification. I am betrayed *too*, that was it. I, too, am robbed and betrayed and *therefore* *guiltless*.

He opened his eyes in the black night, lying on the lumpy bed in his rented room, surrounded by solidly sleeping Novaks. He was not sure whether he had been asleep or not. It had become his habit to lie for a while, after he got into bed, thinking back over his life, trying to lay his memories straight, to see what he had been in the light of what he was becoming. Sometimes it was exasperating; he found himself still repeating patterns of rejection and withdrawal, of suspicion and shyness, which he condemned and yet could not get rid of. But in the main, it was deeply, deeply interesting, this exploration of himself. He had, he saw, found first a villain. That was the end of something, though, although apparently it had been the beginning of his quest. But he had been flung into this year of searching and exploring while still repeating a set pattern of thinking, and the first adventure had been a satisfaction of that pattern. He sighed deeply. Yes, that was it. I am *guiltless*. Look, you can't blame *me* for anything—I've been tricked, all my money stolen.

After that had come the time when, really free, the search had truly begun. And he had found a friend and a way to make a living and a way of life. And then, beginning to return, to look about himself and make judgments, to seek out his past as well as his present, he had found a lover, he had found Rose. A villain, a friend, a lover. Evil first, affection and trust and strength second, and third the test of these, intimacy. All in a year. And now he was alone again (for he did not see that in helping the Novaks he was doing what Cap had done for him, did not take in how he was going on from protégé to benefactor), but he had a new canon of experience, a new basis for judgment. He was alone for

a purpose, to think his way back and to feel his way forward into the future, to learn how never to be alone again.

To learn how to live in America the commonplace everyday life of the nineteen-forties. A life that was not classic, hieratic, beautiful with symbols and rituals; and if not classic, if romantic, then a life whose romance was not easy to see. The romance of two generations ago we can appreciate. His grandfather's world of the great forest, of the siege of Vicksburg, of the buffalo and the Indians of the West whose world was not yet shattered, whose skies were alien, seventy years ago, this was hair-raising, breath-stopping, as romance should be. But Detroit in 1946? Romantic? And yet it *had* to be. There was no other word that described it. As long as thought was limitless, as long as anything could happen (and it was and it could), America was committed to romance. Though it was hard to think it, it was easier to feel it. Awake at night, on the bus in the afternoon, coming out of a movie, he would catch a whiff of the country and the city and the people of the city. To endure, to experience, to move from nightmare to the noon-day epitome of ordinariness every twenty-four hours, to love and to hate, to choose and to reject simply and at once—all these things seemed to him heroic beyond the need of boasting. And into this epic world, this simple world, he had escaped. He was a common human being and so part of a community, part of humanity, here in Detroit, in the Novaks' house.

After Gregory left, Rose was dazed. For two weeks she was never really sure whether she was where she seemed to be—in the office, on the street, alone in her apartment—or whether these things were the dream and the shaking internal reality, the constant reliving and re-creation of Gregory, were the truth. She fell into conversations with him and would sit, lips moving, hands twisting, carried past her stop on the trolley, sunk fathoms deep in the dark well of their week together. She grew thin, slept badly, ate hardly at all. Mr. Browning told her she must take a vacation and, when she smiled listlessly, manfully took hold and arranged for her to go away over the Christmas holidays. "Now you go to Florida, young lady," he told her, "and get a sunburn. You'll come down with pneumonia if you don't, and then where'll I be?"

"You're very kind," said Rose, and her eyes brimmed with tears at his kindness so that she had to run out of his office or she would have shed them all over the papers on his desk, like a tropical storm. But it made no sense, for she knew that she could never, never, manage a Florida vacation. To wangle a hotel room and space on a Pullman in such a crowded season—it was a nightmare to think of it. Nor could she go home. Her family would put her to bed and set out in a posse to lynch whoever in Washington had upset her so. She laughed hysterically at this scene as it appeared in her mind and looked around to see where she was—or seemed to be.

In the elevator. It was going down. She stole a look at her watch. Five-thirty. She was going home at the end of the day.

The elevator stopped. The door slid back. As the people in front of her started out a hand took hold of her arm and held her back. "What's the joke?" said a voice in her ear.

She looked around into a face which seemed for a moment absolutely strange. Then she placed it. Of course. Dave Gaffney, deputy to one of the assistant secretaries at the War Department. "Private," she said, and managed a smile that must have come out, she thought, like the Cheshire Cat's.

"Nonsense." He walked her to the door. "No one's entitled to a private joke these days. Share the wealth. Come and have a drink and tell me all about it."

"Well, I'll have a drink" (wonderful not to have to go home alone!) "and I'll tell you all about something—I'm not sure just what——"

"Have three drinks and tell me all about everything."

"Not a doubt in the world that I would if I did!" and Rose laughed again. The awful tension and strain had not lifted, it had broken, but the result was the same. She felt lightheaded and giddy and, with the first drink, very gay. She did have three, but she didn't tell Dave a word about anything. Instead, she laughed and laughed and so did he and they had dinner and a wonderful, very funny time. He took her home at eleven and asked her for another date (this was terrific, he was a really important person), said he would call her about Friday night, kissed her (very nicely; she kissed him back nicely), and left. Rose went inside, looked

around the apartment, took a deep breath, and laughed again. All the time she was getting undressed she chuckled from time to time, and when she looked at her face in the bathroom mirror she said sternly to herself, "You're drunk." But she got into bed still chuckling a little and she went to sleep happy and slept as she could not remember sleeping.

Thus began for Rose a winter of fantastic gaiety. There were suddenly a lot of young men around, the young men coming home from the war; gasoline rationing ended; it became possible to drive again through the dark nights to roadhouses which had been shut for four years. The dimouts vanished in a blaze of bright lights. She flew to New York for a week end with two nice boys (and another girl, of course), and Dave got mad at that and quite proprietary. It was really absurd that she should suddenly, overnight, have a steady beau and half a dozen other men wanting to date her! It was so absurd, in fact, that she found it not strange but only funny. It made her laugh more than ever, and her merriment fascinated Dave and the other young men, and even more clustered around her. "I'm having a rush," she wrote to Katie in Chicago, "it's too idiotic, I feel seventeen. What in the name of heaven shall I do about Dave? He wants to take me South on my vacation—not platonically, I assure you. I'm very fond of him, but not that fond, and even if I were, two weeks of living in sin with someone you're fond of doesn't appeal to me as a good way to get a rest."

"COME CHICAGO CHRISTMAS NEW YEARS," Katie wired back. "AM NOW RICH ENOUGH TO IMPRESS EVEN GAFFNEY DO YOU WANT TO MARRY HIM BRING HIM IF YOU WANT I WILL CHAPERONE RALPH LOADING SHOTGUN HOWEVER HAVE WEALTHY SECOND CHOICE WAITING HERE WIRE REPLY COLLECT AS DETAILED AS YOU WANT MONEY NO OBJECT LOVE KATIE."

"MAYBE MONEY NO OBJECT BUT WHY OMIT ALL PUNCTUATION STOP SPENT TWO HOURS DECIPHERING WIRE STOP THANK YOU DARLING I WOULD LOVE TO COME STOP TELL RALPH TO UNLOAD STOP I WILL LEAVE WOLF BEHIND," Rose replied, bought three new evening dresses, locked up her apartment, quarreled cheerfully with Dave, who sulked at her departure, and flew out to Katie's new home.

She had a letter from Gregory in her pocketbook, a letter that had come a week ago. She had stood with it in her hand the day it came, feeling a thrill of fear run through her. Her escape from pain was so precarious, the barrier between her new hurrying life and nightmare so tenuous! She waited, feeling her heart pound heavily in her breast, as if she were waiting for a blow. I am going to be hurt, she thought. Then her will said, I have got to read this, I am making it worse. She tore open the letter clumsily.

It was a matter-of-fact and simple letter, telling where he was and what he was doing, describing external events such as the prize fight he had seen, giving his first impressions of the Novak family. It was headed by his address and asked that she let him have news of her. It was affectionate. There might never have been any passion between them at all; except that obviously he felt an obligation to her. It was a letter from a friend.

She read it through and started again. "Dear Rose——" the simplest, barest opening. She shut her eyes to shut out the rest of it, and with them still closed fumbled the letter away out of sight into her pocketbook. What an absurd thing to do, part of her mind said. No, she thought in reply. I can't—I can't deal with this now. I have to wait. Then the telephone rang and the moment was over. Automatically the Rose who had come home from the office continued across the room from the place by the door where she had stopped to read her mail, and picked up the phone.

The sky over the Washington airport was gray, brooding, and filled with snow. She had been afraid the flight would not get off. But they did, pierced the low clouds, and flew into cold and dazzling sunlight. The man next to her was making faces at a lapful of papers. She picked up her pocketbook and took out the letter, thinking, Katie will come and meet me. What a lot of fun we'll have! High in the afternoon, sustained and made safe by the speed of the plane, with the thought of Katie waiting as the compress for her wound, she read the letter again.

"Dear Rose." As she read it, it came to her that he had meant it literally. She was dear to him. The things he was doing, his work, the people he lived with—he wrote about them so that she could know and understand the life he had chosen, the way he

was living; and through these things, himself. He had been drawing a picture for her when he wrote.

She did not know yet what she felt about him. But the letter had suddenly made all the last weeks of gaiety seem very drab and uninteresting. A lot of unimportant people, nothing in the center. He had been her center, unknown for so long, manifest for one short week. And it was hopeless, hopeless and useless. She could not build her life around him. But it was worth something at least to find this out, and to know that she would be useless, worthless, until she found another center.

It was something, too, that she was dear to him, that he was her friend.

And Katie was her friend. It was not the fun she was looking forward to, of course, but Katie's affection. I hope we won't have fun, she thought. I would like to be quiet and do a small number of things slowly, against a background of routine. She felt very tired, exhausted, in fact, and still holding the letter, she put her head back against the seat and fell asleep. Not a deep sleep, though, but an uneasy doze broken twice when they came down at Pittsburgh and in Ohio, resumed with a sigh and a tremor, as if she could not decide whether to wake or sleep; a nightmarish, feverish afternoon, neither one thing nor the other, as if the problems and decisions she had put aside were beginning to stir again and to plague her for solution. John and Dave mixed themselves up in a dream, and that was a terrible thing, it shocked her; she never, never thought of them together. But she saw the photograph of John she had kept; it came into her dream, revolving slowly, and the face was sometimes John's and sometimes Dave's. But I tore it up, she thought. Didn't I tear it up? And moaned with guilt. And the boy who'd been along on the New York week end was there too, although she hadn't seen him since. He had announced, Sunday afternoon in New York, that he was going back to Kansas, and instead of returning to Washington with the rest of them he had stayed behind to leave for home. She missed him, though she hadn't known it. He had been solid in a way that no one else was. But of course her life this winter was anything but solid, and it was quite right for him to get out of it. She thought he had liked her, but it was obvious now that

he hadn't. After the initial approach he had been repelled and turned away. I don't like myself, Rose told herself in her dream, why should he? I like myself less and less. If I'd been as nice as I was two years ago he wouldn't have gone to Kansas. I'm becoming shrill and common, and I'm grabbing at things. John. Dave. Did I tear up the picture? If I can't have what I want, I grab at what I don't want. I'll marry Dave if I can get him to propose. I'll enjoy that part of it, anyway, maneuvering him into it. And afterward? Well, afterward I'll be married. Isn't that enough? What difference does it make? The symbols of distaste and indifference and anger and disappointment marched through her mind, sometimes in words, sometimes in pictures whose meaning was perfectly clear as long as she still dozed, but vanished at once, the slate wiped clean, as the plane at last set down in Chicago; and she woke and shook her head quickly and oriented herself to arrival.

Katie, in a mink coat, was standing on tiptoe in the front rank of the waiting crowd, peering and waving. As Rose came out, she called, "Rosie, here I am, this is Cal Dennison, I told him all about you and he's crazy to see you, he drove me out; you didn't bring you know who did you? How are you, darling? Your hat's crooked, you look divine!"

Rose hugged her hard. "You're making an exhibition of yourself, shut up," she said. "Hello, Mr. Dennison."

"All right, all right, just a little one, they expect it of me," Katie explained. "I'm supposed to be that wonderful hearty vulgar girl that Ralph Killingley married, and every two days or so I have to be vulgar in public or people think I'm becoming a snob. But I'll swear off while you're here and the hell with them. Did you have a good trip? Cal, take her baggage checks, dear, will you?"

"Horrible, I hate flying. Even in a DC-4 I feel as if I were doing it on a broomstick. Oh, Katie, I'm glad to see you!" she added as Cal went off after her bags.

"There, there, you're all to pieces. I'll put you together again. And if it's just getting married, Cal's perfectly darling, plenty of money and absolutely an angel. Why, you'd hardly notice you were married—if you didn't want to, I mean!" And Katie choked and spluttered with laughter.

"Maybe I'm all to pieces, but I'm not dead," said Rose crossly. "Honestly, Katie, you don't have to become Rabelaisian just because you're married."

"Rabelaisian yourself," said Katie. "All right, we'll see what else we can round up for you."

"I don't want anybody rounded up. I can do that myself, and I came for a rest."

"Don't be cranky, now. Oh, being married's wonderful, *think* of never having to get up in the morning; you must do it and come and live right around the corner from me."

"Doesn't Ralph mind if you don't get up in the morning?"

"No, dear, he likes me better in bed than anywhere else. Oh, good, Cal, you got them. Come on, Rose. Cal drove me out, the airport limousine takes a thousand years, we'll be home in forty minutes this way; I can't imagine why they put the airport out here in Cicero. Except for the convenience of escaping gangsters. I suppose that was it, wasn't it, Cal? Get in, Rose, we can all sit in front, this is the weather for bundling. Now isn't this cozy?" And she chattered all the way in. The night closed down and it began to snow, and Rose, snuggled between Katie and the silent and docile Cal, began to feel amused, began to look forward to the warm end of the journey, Katie's house and a drink and a hot bath, a fire in the fireplace and the snow outside. They turned into a driveway. It was a big new handsome house, full of lights. Katie's husband Ralph came out of the living room into the hall and said, "Hello, Rose, how's my girl?" and kissed her, and she felt as if she had come home.

Not that they didn't have fun. Katie insisted on it. She did round up a number of men for Rose, they went dancing a lot, and there were parties and parties. Rose enjoyed herself more than she had in Washington. Katie's affection for her and Katie's and Ralph's love provided a warmth and a consideration that had been absent before. The parties in Washington had been rather feverish against a stark background of loneliness and the suppression of memory; and Dave's feeling for her, she was beginning to fear, was demanding, angrily intent, not affectionate and kind. Moving for two weeks into someone else's life was a great relaxation for Rose, and she forgot the problems and decisions again.

The day before she was to return to Washington Rose and Katie did a big shopping, exchanging Christmas presents and picking over clothes in the clearances. They came home loaded with bundles in the gray of the afternoon and collapsed in the living room. "Tea," said Katie, "that's what I want, a great big pot of stewed black tea. And cinnamon toast. Would you rather have cocktails?"

"No, tea for me," Rose said, and Katie padded out into the hall in her stocking feet and shouted for tea to the maid.

When she came back she lit a cigarette, swung her feet over the arm of her chair, and said, "Have you had a nice time?"

"Lovely," said Rose, lying back on the sofa with her eyes shut.

"Do you know what you're going to do now?"

"Go back to work."

"What about Gaffney?"

Rose was silent.

"Do you know any more than you did when you came? Are you going to marry him?"

"He hasn't asked me." Rose sat up uneasily and hugged her arms around her, as if to hug her privacy in. Then, to match the gesture, she said, "It's cold in here."

"Nonsense. He'll ask you."

"I don't like him, Katie," said Rose. The words came out unwillingly and she sat staring at the floor. Well, that's it, I guess, she thought. Now I can't marry him. Not now that I know I don't like him.

Katie sat and looked at her for several minutes, and the silence ticked quietly to itself through the room. Rose shivered. "I'll light the fire," Katie said. She stood looking down into it for a while as it caught. "Why don't you like him?" she asked finally and rather angrily, as if she wished she didn't have to ask the question. "Is it Gregory in the way again?"

Rose looked up, startled. "It's nothing but that I don't like him," she said defiantly. "He's not—he's cruel. He never gives anything away. He doesn't want to marry me, you know. I'm much too common. He doesn't think that can be funny, the way you've made a joke of it. But if I trap him, he'd respect me for it. I don't want to have to compete with a man all the time. Everything's a test of strength with Dave. Can I make him do

something, can he make me do something? Can he change me? He thinks I'm sloppy, and he's envious of me for not caring, for being able to be sloppy if I feel sloppy without worrying about it. But if I married him, then he'd worry about it, it would reflect on him. I could never be generous if I married him. I don't like him."

"So I see." The maid brought in the tea tray and Katie went over to it. Rose got up and took her cup and drank it by the fireplace, warming herself. "Why get involved with him then?" Katie asked.

Rose shrugged. "I was at loose ends after——" She paused. "After what?"

"After you got married," she answered promptly, lifting her head as if listening for something. For danger.

"Oh, pooh," said Katie. "You sound as if we'd been two nice little Lesbians. Maybe you were lonesome for a couple of weeks and no doubt you decided it was time you got married, too, but it wasn't my getting married that put you in a tizzy." And she stared severely at Rose, who humbly bowed her head and finished her tea.

"You want to get married," Katie burst out, "and you can't get married because of Gregory. Damn him."

"No, it isn't——"

"And so you carefully pick out someone to get involved with that you don't like, so that you can't marry him. That's what you did."

"It isn't at all."

"Now you listen to me, Rose Carmody. More tea?"

"Yes, please, and——"

"And shut up. You listen to me," said Katie again, grimly pouring the tea. "You're never going to lay eyes on that man again. Do you hear me? He's no good, and particularly no good for you. He went off like—like—a crazy one, he may be dead, he's certainly cracked, he'll never get away from his wife——"

"He's not dead, and very little cracked, and he is away from his wife!" Rose said, and stood appalled.

Katie looked up at her, openmouthed. Then very carefully she put down the teapot. "When did you see him?" she asked harshly.

"The day after you were married," Rose said faintly.

"No!" Katie looked absurdly as if her feelings were hurt. Then she pressed both hands to her head and began to laugh. "He came to the apartment?" she gasped.

Rose was laughing too. "Yes, he did. He walked right in and stayed for a week. Oh, Katie, I'm ashamed of myself."

"You wicked, wicked girl," Katie agreed, and burst into fresh laughter. "And there was I at death's door, being seasick on that damn Bermuda Clipper! I'll never forgive you." She stopped and looked at Rose. "A week," she said. "Now why a week?"

"He asked me to go away with him," Rose said.

"And did you?"

"Aren't I here instead, you idiot?"

"So you are. You didn't go." She stood up and took Rose in her arms and kissed her cheek. "My poor darling!" she said. "You've spilled your tea. Sit down. Have some toast. You need comforting and I never knew it."

"You've been a great comfort, Katie darling. I'd have gone mad if I hadn't come here. I might have gone off with Dave without even marrying him." She shivered. "He'd have finished me, then."

"Come, come," said Katie, "let's admit you have *some* sense. You wouldn't have done that. In fact, it seems to me you're a great hand at *not* going off with people." She looked at Rose under her eyelashes.

"I won't tell you a thing," said Rose at once. "It's his wife. He—— I don't want to talk about it! It's not that he's married to her, you know, but that he's *married* to her, if you see what I mean. Tied up. Inside. Oh, I don't want to talk about it!"

"Of course not," said Katie soothingly. "But he did want you to go with him?"

"Yes. Yes, he did. But I don't think——" Rose looked over at the window. The street lamps had come on, the wind howled suddenly. "I didn't go," she said.

"My dear," said Katie, "now you can get over him. Thank God."

"Oh, Katie," said Rose, "I can't seem to!"

"Yes, you can," said Katie steadfastly. "You're half over him now."

"Am I? It doesn't seem that way."

"At *least* half over him. At any rate, now you have something to get over. Something to forget."

"And remember."

"And remember, surely. But not now. When you're old and have stewed black tea every afternoon, like this, and a fire, waiting for someone to come home. Ralph's late. Has it started to snow again?"

"No, I don't think so. It's only half-past five. Will I do that, do you think?"

"Naturally," said Katie.

"Katie, will you come and stay with me?"

"I'll live around the corner, I keep telling you, and be over every day criticizing your housekeeping. My dear, did you ever see such poor tatting, hardly a decent antimacassar in the place! And her rubber plant's stunted! Red spider all over the aspidistra—— There's Ralph now. He'll want a drink and so do you." She got up and went out into the hall, talking all the time, to Ralph and the maid and anyone within earshot.

Rose wiped her eyes and got up. "Hello, Ralph," she said, "your wife's wonderful, she made me laugh so hard I'm weeping."

"Hello, dear," said Ralph, and kissed her. "You're very good for her, you keep her practically civilized. Why don't you stay? I think you're nuts to go back to Washington. Move in with us."

"Thank you very much, but I can't. I have to tell a man I won't marry him. It will be a great relief to him. Though not as much," she added reflectively, "as if he'd already asked me."

"Poor soul," said Ralph. "Well, wait till I run through Katie and I'll marry you myself. Though I wish you'd stay now. I rather like the idea of a harem—a small, select harem, that is. Katie, where's my drink? I want an old-fashioned. Get to work, get to work, my girl. I'll have no dawdling here!"

"Will you take him off my hands, Rose?" Katie asked. "The overbearing beast!"

"No," said Rose, "I think I shall toy with the idea of being an old maid. But if I ever join a harem, Ralph, I'll make it yours. Good-by now, I'm filthy and I want a bath." She went out and up the stairs to her room. There she sat down, huddled over the pain inside. Get over him, she thought. Yes, I shall have to get

over him. And I'd better not use Dave, he's too dangerous. All by myself. It seemed an enormous task. I never did tear up John's picture, she thought. I'll do it first thing I get back. After a while she got up and went into the bathroom and turned on the tub.

CHAPTER 14

It was in April that Ellen spoke. April the opener, month of thaws and floods and avalanches, of breaking and loosening and shifting, loosened her tongue. There was water everywhere, running under the snow, under the ice, cutting canyons and forming deltas to amaze the inundated fieldmice. Mud appeared above the flood, and the smell of earth, freed anew from its anniversary of glaciation, blew through the air all day long. Daily the tops of the trees thickened, and on the south side of the house the crocuses bloomed as the snow went and the daffodil swords stood two inches high, piercing last year's mulch of dead leaves. At noon, in a sheltered place, the sun was warm, and the sky was a thousand miles farther away than last week in March.

"This is the time of year," said Ellen to Marion, "when I always want to go out and seek my fortune." She had a pair of pruning clippers in her hand, and she had stopped on the stone terrace to take off her muddy galoshes before she came into the house. She had on ski pants and a leather jacket, but she had pulled off her gloves and the scarf she had tied around her head. She lifted her face to smile at the sun, and Marion felt herself suddenly pierced with pity. Ellen looked so young! So much tragedy within so small a circle for her—twenty-five years and back again to the home she had left. It was terrible that with so much life behind her and so many years still to be lived through (and how, how in the world was Ellen to live them?) Ellen should look, for that moment, like a girl. The years should have both hurt and armored her. But there was no sign of either in Ellen's face.

"I know," said Marion, though she didn't know at all.

"The cruelest month," said Ellen, leaning against the wall by the door, "'mixing memory and desire——' But that's only

if you're old and must sit still in one place. If you follow your memories and go after your desires— Why should beginnings be cruel? No, no. That's not right, not fair. He shouldn't say that. Beginnings should be happy and strong."

"Hand me the clippers," said Marion. "They get in your way."

Ellen laughed. "Yes. I always used to tell Timmy, when I was buttoning him and buckling him and zipping him up in weather like this, that I needed three hands. And I wanted the extra one set on backward with the thumb the other way round—think how handy it would be!"

"Wouldn't it," said Marion hastily. She held her breath. Was Ellen going to talk about Tim? But Ellen only stretched—stretched and yawned and said, "I'm hungry. What's for lunch? Marion, do you think we should try to make some maple syrup? There are sugar maples in the woodlot. Couldn't we tap them?"

"Heavens, where would we cook it down?" said Marion. "Can you imagine doing it in the kitchen under Estelle's eagle eye? Anyway, I think it's too late. It's been warm for two or three days now. I think you have to do it earlier." She held open the door, and Ellen passed through, holding her muddy galoshes away from her, and blinking a little in a house that seemed very dim after the brilliance outside.

Marion told Jim that night that Ellen had mentioned Tim's name. She hadn't really intended to. She had meant to be quiet and watch Ellen a little more until she could be sure that this good mood was permanent. But somehow she could never manage to keep things to herself. She always seemed to tell everything to Jim as soon as it happened instead of waiting till she had accumulated a reservoir of observation that would make her opinions incontrovertible. She handed Jim bits and scraps of news, and he took them away from her before she could put them together into any kind of pattern.

He was sitting on the bed changing his shoes to house slippers when she told him, and he took a deep breath and looked up. "She spoke of him just naturally, like that?"

"Yes," said Marion. "You know—as if everything were all right. As if he were alive."

"Then she's over it," said Jim. "She's going to be all right." He sat still for a moment, taking this in, feeling the terrible

weight of his concern for Ellen lift—and feeling only then how heavy it had been.

“She looked like a girl for a minute,” said Marion. “She laughed. She said she wanted—how did she put it?—to go out and get a job, she meant. Seek her fortune, she said. But I don’t think——”

“Well, she doesn’t have to get a job, thank God. But perhaps she’d like to travel a bit. It’s hard to say just where—Europe’s out of the question, of course, and it’s too late to go South. I wonder if it’s difficult to get passage to Hawaii?” He looked up at Marion and grinned all over his relieved face. “What do you say, old girl? Shall we all go? Make a real holiday of it?”

“Wouldn’t it be fun?” said Marion, looking over his head, leaning against his shoulder.

“Let’s do it then.” He put his arm around her hips as she stood next to him and hugged her.

Marion sighed almost inaudibly, pushing him away. “Your mother,” she said. “The girls——”

“Damn the girls,” said Jim, but he stood up abruptly and she knew that his dream of Hawaii was over.

The next time Ellen spoke it was to Jim. Late in April the question of renewing the lease on the Washington apartment came up. The Duncans, who rented it, had been there a year and were willing to buy the furniture if they could get possession in their own name. The sublease was a nuisance, and Jim advised Ellen to accept their offer.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s the only sensible thing to do.” She rubbed her forehead between her eyes and stared off at the line of the hills. They were sitting on the terrace, which was flooded with noon sunlight, waiting for Sunday dinner. Marion opened the door and called, “Come on in and have a cocktail.”

“It’s too good out here,” Jim said. “Make a martini and bring it out. You hardly need a jacket.” Marion vanished and he went on, to Ellen, “Is there anything in the apartment you want? They couldn’t object to your taking anything you—you’re attached to. I’ve got to go to Washington sometime this month to see about that tax ruling, and I could have anything you wanted shipped up and settle the rest of it for you.”

“There’s nothing I ever want to see again,” said Ellen.

Her bitterness upset him. "You shouldn't feel that way," he said helplessly; but she did not answer, and her face, looking past him, remained implacable. He reached out and took her hand, but it seemed immune to comfort, lying in his, as if the fact that he touched her were not merely irrelevant, but a falsehood. He did not touch her. The thin hand where the blue veins showed faintly on the back and at the wrist, yet strong and padded of palm, wiry of finger—this contradictory hand lay in his but did not communicate either with him or with the brain that moved it faintly, that sent the blood ticking through its veins. "But that was in another country, and besides the wench is dead." The line, requoted often enough for him to have heard, more, to remember it, came into his head and he rejected its meaning at once—Ellen's pulse beat against his fingers—but could not stop its repetition as meaningless syllables. "In another country, and besides——" "It's all over," he said. "It's as if it happened somewhere else, to someone else, there's nothing you have to worry about any more. If you don't want to think about it you don't have to. I just thought—aren't there some papers there, some records and things? I got an extension for your income tax. It doesn't have to be filed till the middle of May, and I think I've got everything we need, but if last year's return's there, it'd probably be a help to check the deductions, and so on. See what I mean? It's a nuisance," he went on, "but it has to be done. Why don't you just give me a note to Mrs. Whoosis—Duncan—and I'll get all the papers and stuff when I go down and——"

"I don't want to see them. I'd rather they stayed there. I'm afraid——" She stopped, unable to say what she feared; but it was that to stir up the papers might stir up other things too. If they were left to lie and gather dust alone, other things, too, would remain quiet in the dark.

"You don't have to see them," Jim was saying, "if you don't want to. I can sort things out——"

"I'm sorry," said Ellen. "Of course." She sat up straighter, freed her hand from his, and smoothed her hair. A couple of hairpins were loose and she put them in her mouth while her fingers smoothed the loose locks into the knot at the back of her head. Around the hairpins she said, "I was being irresponsible. Of course we have to get them. Thank you for worrying about it. Besides, there may be something that Tim will need."

Jim felt his blood slow down. His heart gave two heavy beats and then for a moment stood still—before it seemed to run away. Ellen took the last hairpin out of her mouth and tucked it into her hair. The butler—Hans was the name of this one—opened the door and came out with a cocktail shaker and glasses. Ellen took one, her hand steady as a rock. Jim waited and said, as Hans went in, “You mean John.” His voice was hoarse.

“John?” said Ellen after a minute, and he heard strain in her words but could not pay attention to it.

“You said—‘something Tim will need.’ You mean John.” Idiomatic. Of course she did. Why did he have to insist on it?

“I don’t care what John needs,” said Ellen, and laughed coldly. “He can starve, for all of me.” She was quite cheerful about it.

“Tim’s dead, Ellen,” said Jim, quickly and too loudly.

She looked at him and smiled. “That’s what John *said*.” Her lips sipped the martini delicately. “He never showed me anything, you know.”

Appalled, his voice lowered in terror that someone should overhear, Jim leaned toward her. “Where is he, then?” It was a conspiratorial whisper.

Ellen put her hand to her forehead. The place between her eyes seemed to bother her—and yet there was no wrinkle there. She seemed to be trying to think where her son might be. “In a hospital?” she said questioningly. “Perhaps he’s a prisoner.”

“Ellen,” said her brother, “the war’s been over for a year now. There are no prisoners who aren’t free and home.”

“There are people in hospitals,” said Ellen.

“But they know who they are.”

“Sometimes they forget. And besides—he might have hidden him from me.”

“Who?” He drank. The martini tasted quite normal, which was shocking.

“John. Have hidden Tim from me. He could have, without any trouble. He was down as next of kin, instead of me. I wondered and wondered about that—he wouldn’t tell me why he did it.”

“Because he wouldn’t want you to get any—news first, dear, that’s all. Why, just with the girls at school, I do the same. If there’s an accident the headmistress is to notify me, not Marion.”

She shook her head. "John didn't think that way. He did it so he could keep things from me." She laughed. "It sounds absolutely fantastic, doesn't it? That a normal man could do such a thing. But he wasn't normal, you see. I didn't realize, of course, until he went off—— It explains a lot of things I'd wondered about. He *wasn't* normal."

In the hot sun Jim was suddenly conscious that he was sweating all over. "Let's go in," he said. "It's too hot here."

She stood up gracefully and he followed, his eyes fixed on her back. It's true, he wasn't normal. He did go off. Mightn't it, mightn't it be possible? his brain muttered, as if in prayer. And desperately he kept himself from answering. Because it wasn't possible. It wasn't possible that Tim was alive. In a year's time there must have been some sign. And yet—— And yet—— Mightn't it be possible?

I've got to find out for her, bring her proof, he thought. She's been so well. It's just this last fantastic hope—and yet, not so fantastic. Poor dear, no wonder she clings to it. Perhaps it would be kinder not to find out. No. She's got to accept the truth. Even the doctor said that. He said when she did, finally, she'd be well. She's been so well, ever since before Christmas. Just this little confusion now. If we can get rid of it . . . Bring her some document she'd accept . . . I'll go to Washington tomorrow. No, can't tomorrow. Tuesday, then. I'd better wire the Statler—Carlton too, maybe, and the Mayflower. One of them ought to have a room. Mightn't it be possible? Just barely possible? If he had amnesia? They did, of course, often. And she's quite right about John. He *wasn't* normal. He *did* go off——

"Jimmy boy," said his mother, "how hot you do look! Run upstairs and change, dear. And shower."

"Mother," said Marion's voice as her strained glance sought the impassive face of the butler, who was waiting to seat them, "dinner's all ready."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Talcott. "It can wait. Tell the cook to keep things for twenty minutes, What's-your-name."

"Very well, madam," said Hans with poison under his tongue. He and Estelle were free after dinner. Now they were going to miss the movie they wanted to see.

And instead of seeing Marion's anguish and insisting upon

sitting down at once, Jim said, "All right, girls, I'll be just a minute," and went heavily upstairs. He took almost half an hour, letting the shower pour over his shoulders hypnotically, trying to get rid of his worry before he came down to a roast that was both dry and cold, and Marion's bitter certainty that Hans and Estelle were going to give notice.

Jim Talcott got to Washington Wednesday morning on the sleeper. The Statler had found a room for him and he rode out to Sixteenth and K with three other passengers, registered, and went upstairs, all without really waking up. He didn't sleep well on trains—never had. He'd dozed just enough to be numb all over, and very clumsy. He tipped the bellboy, shut the door, and stared dully around the room filled with bright efficient "moderne" furniture. He didn't know what to do next.

Breakfast might be a good idea.

He ought to shave.

He went over to the phone by the bed to call room service. But the bed—looked—comfortable. He yawned shatteringly, lay down, and fell fast asleep.

He woke about ten and lay swallowing his astonishment to find himself here. He was extremely uncomfortable and his feet hurt. Good God! He'd been sleeping in his clothes! It was just what he'd expect Washington to do to him, trap him into this kind of vulgar messiness! He sat up, shook his head, called the valet, called room service, stamped into the bathroom to shower and shave, came out to glare at the waiter who brought him his breakfast (he needn't think I usually sleep till this hour!), and began the eternal telephone calls that every visitor to Washington must make by the dozen.

His business, as he might have guessed, was going to hold him up. He couldn't get an appointment at Internal Revenue till the next afternoon. Yes, they'd had his wire and his secretary had phoned, but he'd have to see Mr. Ederle, and the only time Mr. Ederle had was at three-fifteen tomorrow after——

"O.K., O.K.," said Jim, and hung up. He sat rubbing the back of his neck for a minute. Now, about Ellen . . .

How in the name of God should he go about it? Call the War Department? That would take forever. He didn't even know the

name of the division that would be in charge of records of deaths. Call his representative? Or one of the senators? Thank God they had one Republican, at any rate! Yes, that would be the thing to do. He didn't know the senator, of course—he was an ex-admiral. Would he have to explain *why* he wanted documentation of the death, late in 1944, of Timothy Gregory, somewhere in France—or was it Belgium? And what was Tim's division and his identification number? God damn it! Jim Talcott didn't know.

But the papers at the apartment! Yes, of course, it must be there! He reached out for the phone and dialed the number which he had had to look up (under Gregory still) because Ellen didn't remember it any longer.

"Mrs. Duncan? Mrs. Duncan, this is James Talcott. I'm Mrs. Gregory's brother. I——"

"Oh yes, indeed. Well, think of that. How is Mrs. Gregory?"

"Very well, thank you."

"I've had a call or two for her every now and then. I haven't liked to have people bother her over nothing, but on the other hand, if it sounded like a friend, well, I've said she's in Connecticut. Then anyone who knows her real well says, 'Oh, in Norfolk?' and I say yes because I see they know her. I hope that's all right."

"Yes, oh yes, thank you, that's very sensible and helpful of you. Mrs. Duncan——"

"Of course, if they don't seem to know, then I just——"

"Mrs. Duncan, I believe my sister left some papers—records of various kinds—at the apartment. Can I come out and pick them up? As I wrote you, the lease will——"

"Pick them up? Now, Mr. Talcott, you know you can't do that!"

"Can't——" Jim was stunned. What *did* the woman mean?

"No, of course not. They're all locked up. Mrs. Gregory didn't think it best to leave the key here, though I'm sure I've never been suspected of *prying* and I've rented some very fine homes, some very fine homes indeed. No, Mr. Talcott, you can't get the papers from me, because I don't have a key. That Miss Carmody has it. I *guess* she still does, that is. She came here once last summer to go through things. I *suppose* Mrs. Gregory knew about it. I didn't think it was my place to interfere. So I guess you'll have to talk to her."

Jim sat very still, his hand hard on the phone. "Who is it you're talking about, Mrs. Duncan?" he said, and all the cold contempt that a Talcott could feel for petty and malicious gossip came out in his voice.

"I'm talking about!" said Mrs. Duncan. "Who is it *I'm* talking about! Well, indeed! *I* didn't give the key to Miss Carmody, Mr. Talcott. It was Miss Carmody who decided not to give the key to me and told Mrs. Gregory she'd keep it."

"Yes, I see, Mrs. Duncan, but who is Miss Carmody? How did she get into this?"

"Why, we rented the apartment through her! That's——"

"Oh—a real estate agent. But why——"

"No, not the agent, that was Mr. Tucker. Why, Miss Carmody was *supposed* to be Mr. Gregory's secretary. Isn't she?"

"Oh——" said Jim. "Rose. He always called her—— Of course. Forgive me, Mrs. Duncan. I'd forgotten her last name for the moment. I understand now. Miss Carmody has the key to the—to where the papers are? A cupboard?"

"A closet. A hall closet. And it's been most inconvenient——"

"Do you happen to know where I can reach her now?"

"I've no idea," said Mrs. Duncan acidly.

"Don't you have a phone number?"

"No," said Mrs. Duncan. Let him look it up, she thought. "I guess it's in the book," she said grudgingly.

"Yes, but she'd be at work now. Do you know where she works?"

"Something Extra—Extra Something——" said Mrs. Duncan. "It's something like that. I really don't pay much attention to Miss Carmody, Mr. Talcott. Some people go poking their noses into everyone's business, but I don't do that. No indeed. No, I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. Talcott."

"Thank you, Mrs. Duncan," said Jim, grinding his teeth in rage at the woman. "I'll manage to find her." He hung up, so angry that the coffee he had drunk for breakfast sat in his stomach like a stone. He picked up the phone book and found Rose's number, but there was, of course, no answer. Extra Something—— What could that fool of a Duncan woman have meant? Warily he dialed the number of Gregory's old agency and resigned himself to the task of tracking down someone who

had been there a year ago and might know where Rose was now. At any rate, she was still in Washington.

He didn't find her till that afternoon. By that time he was relatively acclimated to Washington, for the amount of annoyance he had gone through in the morning acted as a dose to immunize him against any more; and he was sincerely amused when he discovered that it was the Surplus Administration that had figured in Mrs. Duncan's brain as "Extra Something." He had been out to lunch with a lawyer and a lobbyist and the cocktails he had drunk had done something to dispel his uneasiness at being, first of all, not at work at three-thirty in the afternoon, and secondly, in Washington where the politics come from. Politics were bad. Business was good. Had to be. One was a parasite, one produced. It was one of his deepest beliefs.

"Is Miss Rose Carmody there?" he said into the phone.

"One moment, please." He waited. And a queer coldness crept over him. This had happened before—or something like it had happened. There was something he knew and had forgotten. Something disturbing. Something to do with the words "Rose Carmody" said over the telephone. Bad, bad, very bad. He saw Ellen, gray-white face and blue lips, mouth open wide, sitting by the telephone and screaming. Bad—awful! He remembered it every now and then, and it was worse than when his father died. Ellen's face, Ellen's body, possessed by a demon, pulled about and distorted so that every single truth was turned into a lie. If Ellen could be turned topsy-turvy like that, what became of the love between them? Everything, everything in the world, could break down into dust and bad jokes!

It was this Rose who had called her just before it happened. No one had ever found out what the call had been about.

Jim Talcott had forgotten that till just now.

"Miss Carmody speaking," said a voice.

"Hello," said Jim hoarsely. "This is James Talcott, Mrs. Gregory's brother."

For as long as it takes to draw a breath there was silence. Then he heard her voice—cautious, guarded, yes—frightened—say, "Yes, Mr. Talcott," and knew that something was wrong, very wrong. Ellen's face screaming. This woman's voice. She'd said six words. It was a common voice. *What had she done to Ellen?*

"I want to see you, Miss Carmody," he said heavily.

"Of course," said the voice. It was quiet and contained now. Resigned? Or callous? *What did you say to Ellen that drove her mad?*

"I'm staying at the Statler. Could you come here?"

"I'll be through at the office about five-fifteen," said the voice steadily. "I could meet you after that."

"I'll be in the cocktail lounge at five-thirty. Just ask the head-waiter for my table."

"Very well." She hung up.

He sat holding the phone, trying to assimilate he did not know what knowledge he was to gain when he should see her and discover what his emotions already knew. He banged the phone down and went downstairs. He couldn't sit and wait for her for two hours, he couldn't concentrate on the papers he'd brought down to go over with that damn tax fellow. He went out and walked—walked hard and he didn't know where. At five he picked up a cab, drove back to the hotel, washed up, and went into the cocktail lounge to wait for her.

At twenty-five minutes to six Rose walked through the lobby of the Statler, thinking, This is just how a prisoner must feel on his way to be executed. The last mile. She could not explain why she was so sure that James Talcott had come to accuse her of deceiving his beloved sister with her husband—indeed, her mind told her that it was absurd. How should he, how should Ellen, know anything about it? Only from John—and she could not feel that John had gone to Ellen. Somehow, she would have known, she thought. The forgetting of John would have been more successful. And yet, guilt-walked with her down the corridor to the lounge, pushed open the glass door with her. The head-waiter turned and bowed. "I'm meeting Mr. Talcott," she said, and thought, There it goes, there goes my death warrant. The last mile. It was with a curious sense of unreality that she followed the waiter through a maze of small tables.

And saw suddenly—unreally—sitting with several men at a larger table, Dave Gaffney, whom she had not seen now for two months. Oh, fine, she thought, this is really something. All my sins are going to find me out. Dave looked up and saw her and half rose, then sank back. She smiled at him, as if she were smiling

at life from the death cell. He stood up then and watched her go by, and she knew that he would be looking at her all through what was going to happen. Ahead of her a big man at a small table got to his feet and stood waiting. He doesn't look a bit like Ellen, she thought, but as she came up to him and he said, "Miss Carmody?" and held out his hand, she saw that his eyes were just the same as Ellen's—the same color, and a little blind, in the same way, with courage and loyalty. Lion's eyes, she thought.

"Yes, Mr. Talcott," she said. "I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"Not at all." He indicated the martini glass on the table, almost full.

The headwaiter seated her and said, "Another martini?"

"Thank you," said Rose. He went away and she pulled off her gloves slowly. I must speak before he does, she thought. "How is Ellen—Mrs. Gregory?" she said.

"She's been very ill," said Jim. He watched her eyes move slowly up from the gloves she was smoothing, her hands stop. Her eyes met his. She was profoundly shocked. He felt suddenly uncertain. She did not hate Ellen at all. What had he been imagining? And yet—her voice—she had been guilty——

"I'm so terribly sorry! I thought when I spoke to her once last summer she seemed—I don't know—upset?" She gave the word a questioning tone, as if not sure it was the right one.

"I wonder what you talked to her about then, Miss Carmody." His voice had hardened and roughened. "You see, it was just after that—— Well, she had a breakdown. She was sitting by the telephone and—well—I can't quite——"

Rose's face was a mask of horror. "You mean—that phone call? Right after that? Oh no, Mr. Talcott! Oh, why didn't you let me know? Why didn't you call me?"

It seemed odd to Jim now that they hadn't. The force of her emotion was so convincing. Why hadn't he called her? Why, she would have been anxious to help! He became conscious that he was liking her, and he decided he must put a stop to that at once.

"I was pretty upset," he said briefly. "Didn't think about it, I guess. In fact, it wasn't until today that I realized—remembered—it was you who had called."

"Is that why you called me?" said Rose. The waiter put a cocktail down before her and she picked it up and took a drink thirstily.

He saw that her hand was shaking and said, "Better get us two more of those, waiter," and to Rose, "Well, no. I was going to call you anyway." He waited, but she did not ask why. Then abruptly, and to his own surprise, he heard himself say, "Miss Carmody, did you ever happen to see the records of Timmy's death?"

"Why, yes," she said, and he saw that he really had surprised her. Whatever she had expected, it was not that. "Yes," she said helpfully, though with decent regret, "I remember taking the telegram in to John the day it came." She looked back across the months to see it again. "He was reading something. He told me to open the telegram for him. So I saw it. Though I knew, I think, even before——" She looked back at Jim, still puzzled.

"Nothing," he said. "All right." He put his head on his hands, stared savagely at his drink for a moment, then he picked it up and drank it off. "What was it you told Ellen that time last summer?" he asked harshly.

"I'd had a letter from John," she said. "I wanted to tell her."

"You?"

"Yes. I think—I thought——" She shut her eyes and tried to get back to what it was she had thought then, so long ago. That old truth would be her best defense, better than any lie. "I don't think he dared write to her direct. I had the feeling he wanted me to—to deliver a message for him to her."

"What message?"

"I—— It wasn't a very coherent letter. That he was—alive and thinking about her, I guess."

"But he wrote to you," said Jim, and his voice was savagely, triumphantly, hurtful. "Doesn't that mean that he was thinking about you?"

How funny, thought Rose, how very funny to be suspected of the true thing for the wrong reason! "I didn't work for John and act as his mistress on the side, Mr. Talcott," she said. "Perhaps it seems odd that he wrote to me last summer instead of Ellen—but I'd worked for him for eight years, you know. I must have done ten thousand errands for him. If he thought of me, it was

as someone to do an errand for him. He wrote that he wanted his ration book." She shrugged her shoulders and finished her drink. God forgive me, she thought. I haven't actually lied yet, but God forgive me if I have to. I can't tell this man about John and me.

"I'm sorry, Miss Carmody," he said, and she saw that his big hands were clumsy with embarrassment because he had been rude to her. "I didn't mean I thought—there was anything between—you and John."

I don't know what you did mean then, she thought, and said, "Tell me about Mrs. Gregory, please. Is she very ill?"

"She's much better now. Quite—quite recovered, I think." But his lips grimaced as he said it, and he could feel her looking at him curiously. He was swept suddenly by a wave of despair. Oh, Ellen, Ellen, he thought, Tim's dead, dead, dead, there's no doubt of it, this girl has no doubt of it! I'll have to tell you about it and make you believe it. And the girl across from him knew so much about it, knew Ellen and called her by her first name and knew John intimately, had worked for him for eight years. Knew so much! And he could feel her twisting away from him, knowing all the things she would never tell him, resolved to tangle him in nets whose relations he would never be able to straighten out. Helpless, frustrated, bound round by emotions he knew must be there but would never be able to identify, he was like some prey in a spider's web. And who was the spider? John? Or was this girl evil and malicious? But how could he ever know!

"What's the use of talking?" he said angrily, for despair made him reckless. A new round of cocktails came and he picked his up. "Have you heard from John again? Where is he now?"

"I don't know," said Rose steadily. "I haven't heard from him." She picked up her glass, too, and drank to her lie. "Has Ellen?" she asked. She didn't mean to, but she couldn't stop the question once it occurred to her that she might ask it.

He resented her asking, she could see, and said pompously, "She hasn't mentioned it to me. But of course she may very well have heard." It wasn't very convincing, he had to admit, she'd see through it. He tried to hang onto his resentment of her, but it was difficult. This common little Irish girl, a secretary—but he couldn't look at her and go on thinking that. Her face was con-

cerned for him, for Ellen. There was real pity there. A vulgar little typist, he tried to say, but any vulgarity he could discover in her was nothing but a difference in custom of as little importance as holding a fork in the right or left hand. She was capable of holding him off, preserving her privacy, and being sorry for him all at the same time. She would not tell him anything, and she would not lose her temper because he asked; she would understand he had to.

"Is Ellen staying in Norfolk, Mr. Talcott?" she asked calmly.

"Yes, oh yes."

"Because I was thinking—about the apartment. I talked to Mrs. Duncan the other day, and apparently they want to take it over and buy——"

"I know. She wrote my sister. As a matter of fact, that's what I wanted to see you about. I talked to her this morning. By the way, she wouldn't tell me how to get hold of you. It took me all day."

"*Dear Mrs. Duncan,*" said Rose. "It's the closet, I think. Like Bluebeard's seventh wife, you know. I have the key to the locked closet. She hates me, Mr. Talcott. She must dream about that closet. I think you ought to get everything out. She's capable of starting a fire or faking a burglary to see what's inside. By this time she must expect bones."

Jim had thought a moment ago that he'd never laugh again, but she made him laugh now. "Well, will you give me the key? I'll get the stuff tomorrow and settle the lease with her. What's the furniture worth, in your opinion?"

"Mmm. It's not what it's worth, it's what you can get for it. You could get more if they weren't in the apartment. But it's an awful job to get anyone out of an apartment once they're in——"

"I don't even want to try. I want to get it settled quickly."

"Well—I'd ask for two thousand and take anything over a thousand. If you were just renting now, you could get three or four. But you could threaten to take some things out——"

He shook his head. "I don't want to do that."

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You wouldn't have to *do* it. You could just say you were going to."

"I don't want to get into a wrangle."

She shrugged, finished the cocktail, looked at her watch.

"Well," she said, "I can drop the key for you on my way downtown tomorrow morning. It's been——"

"Miss Carmody——"

"Yes?"

"One more thing." He didn't want to look at her, made a great play of opening a fresh pack of cigarettes, and held them out to her. She took one. "Could you get me," he asked, "a—a record of Tim's death? A copy of the telegram or——"

"But there's a certificate in with the papers at the apartment," she said.

He stared at her stupidly for a moment.

"I don't know what Ellen did with the things of his they sent her," she went on. "You know, his effects, and so on. Perhaps she—gave everything away or burned it. Didn't want it around. But the certificate was there—I saw it last summer because I had to go through everything looking for John's ration book, you see. Ellen asked me to do that when——"

But he wasn't hearing her at all. Her voice faded in his ears. Ellen had known—had destroyed Timmy's things, read the notice of his death— And made up, made up, made up this belief in his escape. A delusion.

"Why, what's the matter, Mr. Talcott?" Rose was saying.

"Nothing." He felt sick to his stomach, and the noise in this room was deafening.

"Why, there never was any question about"—she started, and then her voice paused and changed—"about Tim's really being dead, was there? But you mean there was," she went on. "Ellen—— But she knew. She—she forgot?"

"It was a pretty bad breakdown she had," he said desperately, looking around the room. He wanted only to get out, and waved violently at the waiter.

"But the insurance," said Rose. "I'm quite sure the insurance money was paid—oh, a month or so before John—before it all happened. I witnessed John's signature to——"

"Oh, my God," said Jim, and stared at her. "I should have thought of *that*." He licked his lips, trying to remember. "Yes," he said slowly. "There was a payment into her account in March——" His voice trailed off. "You must think we're all mad," he said, and then winced at the word.

Rose shut her eyes suddenly. Mad. It was a mad woman, distracted with terror and hurt, building her fragile fantasies as retreats against the brutality of the world, that she had contrived to betray when she was happy with John. Horror spoke deeply, under the earth beneath her, solid no longer, ready to open. Instinctively she felt her lips begin to move in prayer—and stopped herself. Have I a right to pray? she thought. My God, what have I done? It was a pretty bad breakdown, she heard his voice say. She was sitting by the telephone——

It was me, *me*, she'd been talking to. Even then. Before anything happened. As if she knew in advance that I would betray her. It was my voice. It was me she had been talking to. What have I done?

She opened her eyes and looked at Jim Talcott. He was paying the check. He was carefully generous with the tip. He was a kind and insensitive man. He would be torn in pieces for his sister. He must have thought, once or twice lately, that this process was beginning. And Ellen was mad.

And there was nothing Rose could do about it. She would have to bear her guilt without being able to make any act of penance whatsoever. Caught in the engine of circumstance, her intentions—they had almost been good—were irrelevant; her emotions were nothing but the heat and friction which the machine developed. To help Ellen, to heal John—had her desire to do these things been anything but meaningless interference? Once Timmy was dead and the flaws in John were found out, once Timmy was dead and Ellen wounded, what could anyone do? Had she, in the end, done any more than give John the grossest physical comfort, or offer Ellen the most distant possibility of companionship?

Jim Talcott was looking at her, his hands on the table, ready to push his chair back and rise. "I want to thank you," he said, "for all you've done."

"I haven't done anything." Rose felt faintly amused at how true this was. "I wish I could do more."

"I guess there's nothing anyone can do. She'll just have to manage to accept it somehow." He was talking almost to himself.

"It's hard to accept."

"Don't I know it? I look at the ones who came through all

right—even I—and catch myself thinking, Why did it have to be Timmy? Why couldn't it have been you instead?"

"I know." But she was thinking that even if Timmy had come through it mightn't have made any difference. Everyone was thinking of Timmy now only as the link between his mother and father. But Timmy had been a person, too, with a right to his own life. Timmy was not a healer any more than she was. Timmy was the instrument, not the initiator. John and Ellen and circumstance had forged John's fate. Ellen and John and circumstance had shipwrecked Ellen. If Timmy had not died, things would have been different, yes. But would the difference have saved Ellen?

Jim Talcott pushed his chair back and stood up. On shaky legs she walked ahead of him through the noisy room. The people she passed had turned into caricatures, distorted and alien. Her old connection with them seemed severed. I hope I never see any of them again, she thought, projecting her fear of this tangle of John and Ellen and Jim Talcott out into the indifferent room around her. I want to go home and be alone. I'll take a bath and wash my hair and manicure my nails. And this time I really will tear up that damn photograph. I'll pick up a novel at the lending library. I'll be luxuriously selfish.

But as they came out the door into the corridor to the lobby, she saw Dave Gaffney sitting on a sofa across from the door, waiting. He looked at her as she came out and sat still, continuing to look, without rising or saying a word.

"Good-by, Mr. Talcott. Thank you for the cocktails," she said, trying not to sound distracted. "I'll leave the key at the desk here for you tomorrow morning."

"Thank you," he said.

"And if there's anything I can d-do" (Why, I haven't stuttered in years! she thought. This is absurd.), "you know where you can r-reach me now."

"Yes. Thank you. Can I put you in a cab?"

Here was her chance to walk away, escape from Dave's gaze. But she couldn't do it. It would be worse to have him follow her. She had better talk to him at once and get it over with—cut off this connection too.

"Not right now," she said. "I—I believe I'll walk a little. It's

getting so warm. Please tell Ellen——” She stopped. What message could she possibly send Ellen? “Tell her I think about her,” she ended lamely. “I’m so sorry. Give her my love—— Whatever you think best.” She looked at him wretchedly, but she didn’t dare look at him long. For she must take no chance of his glimpsing the truth, she must not cloud his eyes with doubts. He was a simple person, and if he thought her involved emotionally in this affair, he would think—as he had begun to think before—of the simplest involvement. Of herself and John. And however complicated emotionally the truth might be, practically it was just this simple. John’s allegiance to Ellen was much greater than to her, Rose. But John and she had made love and had thus betrayed Ellen. Her guilt and pain were at last as simple as the act itself. If Jim Talcott became conscious of them, they would give her away. I would like to hear how Ellen is, she wanted to say, but was afraid to. “If there’s anything I can do,” she repeated.

“Thank you,” he said again. “I’ll let you know if there is.” For another awkward minute he waited. “Well——”

“I’ll go out here,” said Rose, and started toward the door to Sixteenth Street.

“Well, good-by,” said Jim Talcott, much relieved, bowed, and left her. At the door Rose paused and waited, watching him go—his big square shoulders, his assurance, his simplicity. They seemed very valuable things to her, and she wondered why she had never found a man who possessed them. She could not think of any simple explanation—unless, perhaps, it was merely because such men were very rare.

Then she felt Dave Gaffney join her, though she did not look at him yet. His shadow fell beside hers and she heard his voice say, “Where are you going now, Rose?”

“I was waiting for you,” she said.

“You don’t sound particularly overjoyed about it.”

“Neither do you.” Her tone was vicious. It was the first time she had spoken to him so. Always she had been careful with him, careful to be distant, to establish no connection that would make claims on him. But it was such a relief now not to be careful!

“I’m sorry,” said Dave quite humbly. “If I didn’t sound that way, it’s because I didn’t dare hope you’d be glad to see me. But if you could be, it would make me very happy.”

She stared at him in astonishment. Did he mean it? Was he really nicer than she had thought? Had she misjudged him? Or was he just determined to involve her with him again because she had walked out on him, with the aim—conscious or unconscious—of walking out on her this time? His eyes—they would never give anything away. They were gray and opaque and showed nothing, and she would not find anything out by standing here and staring at him.

“Is that so astounding?” he said, and smiled, and from being a mystery of sincerity became a mystery of mock humility—but was it mock, or was it real? She didn’t know and she felt suddenly that the only thing she could be certain of was that he didn’t know either. He puzzled himself, surely, as much as he puzzled her. “Is it amazing,” he went on, “that seeing you makes me happy?”

“What are you after, Dave?” she asked wearily. “You’ve got me so mixed up now with astoundings and amazings that I don’t know what you’re talking about. Am I glad to see you? Well—are you glad to see me?”

“Like you,” he said, “not particularly. But I couldn’t walk off and leave you. I can’t get rid of you. There’s something here, between us. What do you do to me?”

“Nothing intentional, I assure you.”

“Neat. Neat and bitchy. You’re a lot more bitchy than you used to be. I rather like it.”

“I don’t,” said Rose, appalled. He was right, of course. She was.

“Come and have some dinner,” he said.

“No. I’m going home.”

“Nonsense. You have to eat.”

“Nonsense. I don’t at all.”

“You don’t have to eat with me, you mean.”

His voice had changed and she looked up again to see whether he was *really* hurt. She couldn’t tell, of course. She couldn’t ever tell. Poor Dave. Poor Rose, she thought. And yet he had waited for her. There was something there between them. “I didn’t mean that,” she said, trying to make her voice neutral, to keep the bitch out. “I tell you what,” she said. “You stop deviling me and being hurt and sorry for yourself in order to bother me, and I’ll have dinner with you.”

"Fine." He took her arm. "That's exactly what I said in the first place. I said, if you'd be glad to see me, I'd be happy. It's up to you. Where shall we eat?"

"Anywhere."

They went out together. It's up to me, she thought. It is, too, now. And the trouble is I don't know what I want. Love? Honesty? But I can't seem to have those. So why not Dave? He mayn't be love—but he's something, some kind of a life. She remembered suddenly how she had asked John if he believed that any kind of a life was better than none. We have to, don't we? he had said. She hadn't thought she too would come to believe it quite so soon. At any rate, Dave would be someone to fight with, she thought, and almost laughed. Not that it was funny—her aunt Ursula had made a marriage out of strife for thirty years.

Is this what I have come down to?

She looked intently at the big wheels of the bus that passed in front of them just then as they stood at the corner. They would go over you slowly and inevitably; elephant wheels, the color of elephants.

But that is a sin.

And what have I done that isn't? What road is open to me?

"Shall we go to the Carlton?" said Dave.

For a moment she felt the courage to say no rising within her, the courage to refuse to compromise, to wait for the good thing. But something stopped it. Jim Talcott's eyes? Her helplessness before her guilt about Ellen? If I could *do* something—— But I can never get back to where I was before.

"It's as good a place as any," she said.

CHAPTER 15

Rose's letter reached Gregory on a wind-swept sunny morning when the lace curtains at the windows billowed out into the room and the windows themselves, dusty and rattling in their frames, were unable to hide the glory and purity of the world. Spring, not yet ripened, was adolescent and wild. Gregory woke about ten o'clock and lay in bed for a little while, watching the patch of bright sky he could see and listening to the wind which, invading the room, seemed to counteract the force of gravity, so that everything felt lighter, felt animate and brave. A fine day, a wonderful day.

The letter waited. Mrs. Novak had dropped it on the floor outside Gregory's room. It lay there trembling a little in the draft that swept under the door until the window inside was pushed down and Gregory, yawning and stretching, came out on his way to bathe and shave. He looked down at it in surprise before he picked it up, and was only half reassured to recognize Rose's writing. He weighed it in his hand for a moment and tossed it inside to wait till he was dressed, and went whistling down the hall.

Whistling, he came back, picked it up, and ripped it open. "Dear John," said the letter, "I am sorry to have to write you bad news about Ellen." Gregory's eyes stopped, frozen to the sentences, and for a moment while the wind rose he could not go on. Then he went over to the chair by the table which served him as desk and sat down, spreading the letter out before him, and with a real effort of will forced his eyes ahead. "I have just seen her brother, James Talcott. She had a bad nervous breakdown last summer, and from what he says, I gather that she is not yet fully recovered.

"She is in Norfolk. I am sure Mr. Talcott is doing and will do

everything he can for her. He says she is much better than she was. But I thought you ought to know.

"He came to Washington, incidentally, to see about selling the things in your old apartment to the people who rent it now. It didn't occur to me that you might have any objection, but perhaps you do. So now you know about this too.

"I told him I had heard from you last summer, but not since. I think I lied not only for my own sake, but for his. For yours, too, of course. Compared to your marriage, our relationship was small and is now over. It's not worth hurting anybody for.

"John, I am planning to get married in June to a man named David Gaffney. I don't know if you remember him. He works at the War Department but is going to leave the government soon. I expect we shall be living in New York.

"You don't need to write me. Just say, as you read this, I hope she will be very happy. As a matter of fact, I hope I will be very happy too. But happy or not, everyone has to have a life. This is going to be mine. Dave intends to make a lot of money. For my part, I am going to raise a large family. Along about the third boy, I might name one John.

"Dear, I will not say what I always used to say to you—that if there is anything I can do, I will be glad to do it. There is nothing more that I can or will do. I am writing this at two o'clock in the morning: I have just told Dave I would marry him. Everything is very cold and still. Good-by.

"I am so sorry about Ellen.

ROSE"

The window rattled in the wind. The sky was bright. Gregory lifted his head and sat immobile in the frame of this shabby room, this brilliant day. But Ellen, he thought. But my darling. Within him something said, Now. Now is the time that you have been growing to meet. This is the end of flight and preparation. Here is life to be assumed once more. Can you make a life for Ellen and yourself?

He did not doubt that he could. It was not doubt that held him. It was realization. Guilt trembled within him but did not grow. He had thrown away so much of the past, so much impedimenta, that he thought now in terms only of Ellen's present need

for help, not of the past which had brought her to this need. Last fall, unable to help her, he had known and suffered his guilt for hurting her. But now, learning what the hurt had cost her, he was still able to submerge his guilt because he was going to her. Of course he could take care of Ellen. What did it matter that the slow message had seeped from Jim to Rose, from Rose to himself? It was for him that it was intended. Now was the moment of engagement, now things were to begin. He was going to her at once. But not with a panic rush. With strength and irresistible determination. Out of the limbo of Norfolk he would bring her back to life.

The scene came clear before his eyes—his defiance of the Talcotts, his rescue of Ellen. The prosaic details themselves glowed, were the lacy edge of the fire of strength and promise within him. On the brink of this high divide he could see purpose and past as never before. He was not afraid. He would never be afraid again. Or guilty. What was done was done, and only action could atone. But action is not atonement, it creates the future, it does not repay the past. Secure in action, seeing it plain, he was going to Ellen. He would know what to do.

What will you live on? the Talcotts might say to him, for instance. And where? What have you been doing for money? A factory worker! A lathe operator!

Now at his desk he could see his answer, and it was a little shocking, not only because it was surprising but because it was inevitable. Yes, he would say, I have been a factory worker. Don't laugh at it. But that is no longer important. I was a teacher once, before I went to Washington; when Ellen married me I was a teacher. I can be a much better teacher now. Do you think, he argued in his mind with Jim Talcott, do you think that with my record and my degrees I can't get a university job now, when the colleges are overflowing with boys—young men—back from the war? Do you think I will be a bad teacher because I know about power—though I will never touch it again—or because I know about weakness and the regaining of strength, or because my own son is dead? No. I will be a very good teacher—for the sake of power that must not be misused, for the sake of the integrity I have regained; and for Timmy's sake, to whom I can no longer teach anything. I won't make much money, no, but I will make

enough for two middle-aged people to live on quietly. And Ellen's money you can do what you want with. It's never done us anything but harm, but I was afraid to get rid of it. Not because I wanted money, but because I didn't think of Ellen without it. It was an attribute of Ellen's. But I want Ellen—not Ellen young, or Ellen rich, but Ellen herself.

There was a knock on the door.

"Who's there?" said Gregory.

"Breakfast," said Mrs. Novak.

"Thank you. I'll be right out."

"Hurry now. Such nice eggs this morning."

"Right away." He went over to the bureau for a clean shirt, pulled on his trousers, and went down the hall to the kitchen, where Mrs. Novak had laid his place at the table.

"Such a day this morning!" she said, and cracked two eggs into a skillet.

"Mrs. Novak," said Gregory, "I'm going to have to go away."

She turned around in consternation. "No!"

He picked up the glass of orange juice at his place. "Yes. My wife is sick."

"Your wife!"

"Yes." He groped for an explanation. "She's been in Connecticut with her family. But she isn't getting better there. I must take her away."

Mrs. Novak's little eyes sparkled at him while she took this in. The eggs in the pan sizzled, and with a start she turned to them. "What is it she got?" she asked after a minute. "The t.b.?"

"No," said Gregory. "It's—it's not that kind of sickness. It's—nothing infectious like that——" He hesitated. He was drawing a picture of a sick wife which had nothing to do with the reality of Ellen, or the future he had foreseen. But he wanted it to be convincing.

"Woman trouble?" Mrs. Novak asked.

"Well——" Gregory considered. "You might put it that way."

Mrs. Novak slid the plate of ham and eggs in front of him. "You want to bring her here?" she asked.

"I don't——" Gregory started and then stopped. Mrs. Novak was being very kind. Reassured about infection for the sake, he was sure, of Charles and Sophie, she was willing to take on even

the dark mystery of an invalid with "woman trouble." "That's very, very kind of you," he said, "but I don't think she ought to be in the city. I'm going to try and find some place where she'll be very quiet, with country air—you know."

Mrs. Novak went back to the stove and poured out a cup of smoking black coffee. She put it carefully beside his plate. "Then you want the money, I guess."

For a moment Gregory couldn't think what she meant.

"For a place, for doctors," she said. "You need it right now, I guess."

The money he had lent Mr. Novak, of course.

Oh no, he started to say, I can't take it back. You keep it. But Mrs. Novak, he realized, was correct. He was going to be able to look after Ellen. In the coming argument with Jim Talcott, he had right on his side, he even had common sense. But it would be a lot more convincing to the Talcotts if he didn't have to borrow money from them with which to rescue Ellen from their clutches. Mr. Novak had told him he was acting irresponsibly when Gregory gave him the money. He had been right. And now it was taking Mrs. Novak to point out that what Gregory had felt as a gift really carried with it an obligation of repayment. For a moment his confidence wavered. Was he always going to make stupid and unperceptive mistakes of this kind? Was he overestimating himself when he undertook to go to Ellen?

He sat thinking, stirring his coffee round and round while Mrs. Novak fidgeted. The situation was like a map spread out before him—the country between himself and Ellen traversed by his highway to her, the brick fortress where she was contained, the winding white lanes deep in dust and late summer smells where, it seemed to him, they would later find a dwelling. Was he wrong?

But he had no choice. He had to go to her.

She had always seemed to him so strong. There were tensions within her, he knew that. But he had never imagined that she could be broken. The gallantry, the courage, the oblique but sharp judgments, the steel of intentions, these were Ellen. And they had been overwhelmed.

To meet the demand of this moment was, it seemed to him, the peak which his life must reach. It seemed odd that money should come into it, particularly money which he had thought he was

using generously and wisely. But he had got money as a symbol and money as a connection with reality mixed up, and either he or the Novaks would suffer for it.

He drank his coffee. "When I gave Mr. Novak the money," he said, "I didn't think I'd need it back like this."

His long silence had been a strain on Mrs. Novak. "But with the sick wife!" she cried.

"Yes," said Gregory, "you're quite right, I should have thought of it, of the possibility—— Look. Let me talk to Mr. Novak and see what we can do."

She leaned over him suddenly and patted his cheek. "Don' worry," she said. "We fix something. Don' look so bad. I get Mr. Novak." Apron and all, she whipped out of the kitchen.

Gregory sat stirring the coffee and thinking that he was a damn fool. First things should come first, and Ellen was a first thing. *The* first thing—the only thing, probably, since she had been able to make him deny himself Rose and Rose's comfort. Four hundred dollars he had given the Novaks. He and Ellen could live for two months at least on four hundred dollars, and by the end of that time he'd have a job at a university. And yet—he could not picture the scene in which he would have let the Novaks go bankrupt. He chewed his lip and stirred his coffee and waited for Mr. Novak, who seemed to be taking a long time, and thought that if you were a fool, it was easy to find it out——indeed, unavoidable——but very difficult to find out how not to be. When he heard Mr. Novak's footsteps on the stairs he drank the cold coffee down out of sheer nervousness.

Mr. Novak came in, panting. He waddled over to Gregory and put a roll of fresh bills on the table in front of him.

Gregory sat transfixed.

"Count it," said Mr. Novak.

"I don't——" Gregory began.

"Pshah, be a businessman for once! Count it!"

There was four hundred and six dollars in the roll. "What's the six dollars for?" said Gregory.

"Interest," said Mr. Novak.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" said Gregory. He stood up, a good foot taller than Mr. Novak. "Where did you get this?"

"The bank."

Gregory still glared.

"All right, all right," said Mr. Novak, "I borrowed it, I didn't rob it. Business is better now the strike is over. They lent it O.K. They changed the note. It's yours. Put it in your pocket."

"If you think I want your goddamn six dollars' interest, you can think again!"

"All right, so get mad. Six dollars is six dollars. If the wife is sick maybe it's medicine, maybe it's a doctor comes once, maybe you even buy her some flowers." Gregory picked up the money and put it carefully away in his wallet. "You think anyone would have lent me last December?" Mr. Novak went on. "You don't think that's worth six dollars? I lose the business for that six dollars, and don't you forget it. Where's the wife? Where you go now?"

"Connecticut. Norfolk, Connecticut."

"Anyplace near New Britain? I have a cousin lives there. Well, before the war they live there. But he's an old man, why should he move? Unless he died. No, I'd have heard if he died. Look, if you need any help, ask him. He knows the mayor, he knows the leader, he even knows the congressman, I think maybe. Big man. Rich, too. You remember now?" And he made Gregory write down the cousin's name and address. "He'll get a doctor, good," Mr. Novak promised. "She'll be all right."

When Gregory began packing his little suitcase he discovered that he had acquired, in Detroit, more possessions than would fit into it. It surprised him. But it was an indication, he decided, that he was ready to settle down. A good omen. Sophie, who was not working because it was Saturday, said that she would make a strong package of what had to be left out and send it after him.

"I'll have to write you where to send it," he said doubtfully.

"All right. I can read. Now if you're going to get your own money out of the bank, you'd better hurry. It closes at noon, you know. I'll call up the railroad stations and see when trains to New York leave. Go along. What do you think I do all day at the office? I'm Mr. Timmon's secretary now, you know."

When he had gone, she repacked his suitcase for him, washed his comb and brushes, and put in a nice new tube of toothpaste instead of the dented half-used one he had packed. She stood looking down at her neat packing for a moment after she finished

and thought, A sick wife. So that's why he never looked at me. Then she shut the suitcase. She was a very romantic girl.

And all night Gregory rode East, sitting up in the coach. How many journeys like this had he made in the last year? They punctuated his life, these nights when his mind ranged back over the past, searching for knowledge with which to placate the waiting future.

But this is the last time, he thought. Now there will be the present again, with Ellen, as there has not been for so long. What shall I say to her? But he dismissed the thought, for it seemed to him that the present, and the need for this kind of planning of the present, would not really begin until he saw her. We will begin again, was what his coming meant, and surely he would know how to say this when he saw her, and she would know how to understand.

No Timmy though. No more children. They would be alone. No Timmy, only the empty place where Timmy had been. It will be harder for Ellen than for me, he thought, because the boys I teach will fill the place a little. But perhaps she will want to know them, too, and help them. A college town can be friendly, it contains more than ambition and competition and resentment. There are always a few teachers who care more about teaching than about the recognition and rewards they get for teaching. And surely Timmy would be glad to have other young men taught as much truth as I can manage to figure out and be sure of. Can I help Ellen to that—that this is what Timmy would want us to do?

He had thought this sincerely. But as the words went through his head he stirred uneasily. For was it not sentimental and hypocritical to invoke Timmy as the guardian spirit of his parents' remade marriage? Was not Gregory, even as he pledged himself to truth, falsifying it? For what could it matter to Timmy now? Timmy was dead and could never rise again, for all the thought and planning and hope in his father's heart. This wide, wide world is too narrow to house the dead. It belongs only to the living, and as we grow older this fact begins to pinch. No matter how many trains he might take, how many ships; how many countries he might visit, Gregory would never see Tim again. The young men he would teach would be other young men, and to think of them as replacing his son was an indignity to them.

To let go, to let Tim go—this was the hardest thing of all.

Once there was a woodchuck in a field, he thought, and I tried to make it live. But it was dead. Will I never remember, never understand? I loved him so, he was my pride.

And I was so jealous, so envious, of him. Because I had not become what I should have become. (And what was that anyway? But I will never know.) Was I a person? Or only a scattered bundle of emotions and drives? Only insatiable desire, meaningless power, action divorced from effect, and no justification. Only Roosevelt to justify it all. Roosevelt was a man, not a principle, not a symbol. But I referred everything to him as if he had been not a mortal man but an abstraction. If I did any good things in Washington—and yes, I must have done some good things—I didn't know it. I couldn't have told good from bad, I couldn't have sat down and by thinking have distinguished the two for all the gold at Fort Knox. I insisted on doing what I was told. And when Roosevelt died, all my standards crashed, the fabric tore. What is it I mean? Yes—the veil of the temple was rent.

But Timmy. How can I let Timmy go? And with Timmy, my guilt. Did I kill him? Did I not? Sweating, he stared at the black window. When they told me he was dead, I had a fight with a taxi driver and got drunk. That was Timmy's funeral celebration. Timmy, Timmy, Timmy, he thought, what did I do to you, what is my guilt? Am I murderer or accomplice or the cold Pilate who gave the crowd its sacrifice? What did you think, Timmy, in that astonishing hell of war? And leaning back in his seat, the wheels clacking under him, half believing it possible, he waited, longing, for the touch of the dead; for Timmy's judgment whispered in his ear—Guilty, Not Guilty. . . .

And was ashamed. For Tim was gone and this yearning to recall him was only a desperate pretense. It was a substitute, a substitute for grief. Hopeless, useless grief for the young man dead before his life began, shattered by the clattering anonymous weapons of that war, his beauty slashed, his health stinking and rotten. But surely any substitute is better than this choking frustration and fury?

No. It is not. Because it is untrue. To believe Tim living, to act as if he might speak at any moment, to project him into the future as mentor and guide—oh no. It was wrong. Very wrong. Tim is

dead, lost and destroyed, and let us never forget it. The touch of his hand, the shadow of his presence; these things are deceits, conniving, evil stupidities. Who dares to say that we should live by something other than the truth? On the cold rock, in the black night, let us deny comfort and uphold—as our life line, our only hope—these bitter tenets: that Tim is dead, that we shall all be dead just as Tim is, and all we know, all we learned and loved, lost and vanished.

Heaven? thought Gregory, staring at the night beyond the train windows. Immortality? Hell? But if we know anything about them, the one thing we know is that all we know is wrong. Must be wrong. Is learned in this world and cannot apply to any other world that may or may not exist out there—where Timmy may or may not be.

Good-by, Timmy. There is nothing left of you but the blurred image, cluttered by incorrect and meaningless details, in my heart; and by whatever picture your mother mourns over. It is to her, it is to the living, that I am going. We must heal each other undistracted by our guilt for the dead. Ellen, you have mourned enough. The wheels echoed it. I have run away enough from Timmy's ghost, absorbed in debating my guilt. The one thing I never thought of was that it might not matter. But all that is left of Timmy is what our memories have constructed to hurt us and haunt us and teach us and warn us—and this is not Timmy, but only ourselves reaching toward Timmy and turning back upon ourselves. Why should we love and fear and hate and weep for these dolls we make, these puppet projections of ourselves? For Timmy is dead.

Ellen, he thought, it is possible to live and be happy, since this is part of living. We will begin again together now. It is not possible, indeed, not to live—the attempt results not in death but in deformity, maimed life, but life. It is cruel and necessary to live, and tomorrow we will begin.

It was on Sunday afternoon that he reached Norfolk, that most static time of the week, when church is over and the papers read, when people drive out aimlessly or go for walks in order that they may come home and nap with a clear conscience. Lost in this little drift of time, Gregory stood in the afternoon sunlight and wondered how he was going to get out to the Talcotts. And,

more important, get Ellen away. He'd tried to rent a car in Hartford, but the agencies were closed on Sunday. And the taxis wanted too much money and didn't want to wait.

His eye caught a neon sign in a garage window across the street, and he went over. Here, miraculously, he succeeded in renting an old Model-A Ford. He had to agree to return it by seven and pay a deposit, but it was worth it. With Ellen by his side, he would not care for their seven o'clocks. He could drive her to Hartford, leave the car at the station, and phone them to come and get it. The deposit would pay them for the trouble.

He climbed into his dusty tan chariot, choked her too much, stalled her, and set out finally through the afternoon, through this plateau of hours where two o'clock was indistinguishable from five, in a series of painful jerks, surrounded by a blue halo from the exhaust.

The Model A didn't like the hills on the way to the Talcotts'. The sky sparkled, the wind blew, the willows were yellow and the elms red with catkins, it was spring and almost warm. So warm, indeed, that Gregory sweated in the car as the motor heated up and his wet hands slipped on the steering wheel. It took him half an hour, crawling painfully up the hills in first, to get to the Talcotts'. He turned in between the gateposts, inched up the gravel drive, and just as he got to the courtyard in front of the house, the radiator boiled over. He sat and swore at it for a moment and then climbed out and began trying to get the radiator cap off, swathing his hand in a dirty handkerchief which protected him slightly from being burned. This kept him so busy that he didn't even look at the house but stood cursing by the car, trying to move the cap first with one hand and then with the other, hot and dirty, absorbed and angry.

When the door opened he jumped as if he'd been shot.

Marion Talcott was standing in the doorway. "Hello," she said. "Is there something you want? What is it—— John!" she finished as he turned to her. She stood there drained and white, staring at him as if he were a ghost. Then she clapped the door to against him.

He looked at the door and smiled grimly. Perfect Talcott behavior, he thought. The old lady would do the same thing. Shut the door on anything you don't want to recognize. He wiped

his forehead on the handkerchief he was holding—this did neither the handkerchief nor his face any good—and gave the radiator cap one last twist. It came off, and a cloud of steam arose. Well, he thought, they'll have some trouble getting rid of me till the car cools off, at any rate. His irritation made him childish, spread to the Talcotts themselves. If they won't let me in, he thought, I'll sit down here in the court and shout for Ellen! But I'll see they let me in. He stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket and went toward the door.

It opened. Jim Talcott came out on the step. "Hello, John," he said. "Having some trouble?"

"Radiator boiling," said Gregory. Jim was looking at him fixedly, curiously. The gaze steadied him. Jim was going to be wary, cautious, and polite. He would slam no doors unless he had to. Gregory was visited briefly by a kind of contemptuous pity for him. "How's Ellen?" he said abruptly.

"Pretty well," said Jim.

"I've come for her," said Gregory. Now slam the door, damn you, he thought.

But Jim was not going to. "Come on in," he said. "Don't you want to wash up?"

Gregory looked down at his hands. "Thanks. I guess I'd better." And he went docilely into the house with Ellen's brother and chief guardian dragon. The house was just the same—so much the same that it was like a blow, an explosion of time into the past. It made him bristle and walk warily to think of Ellen caged in this atmosphere. But he went into the lavatory where Jim pointed him and washed as thoroughly as he could manage, even to wetting and parting his hair. He came out and stood in the hall at the foot of the stairs, listening, trying to feel Ellen in the house. But the quiet, the blue carpet on the stair, the blossoming boughs in the big vase under the window, all these insulated him from her like layers of padding. Or was she asleep? An enchanted sleep? From which he would have to wake her— Don't be a fool, he told himself. This is any house anywhere. You're going to take her away from here in an hour.

Jim appeared in a doorway across the hall—the library, it was, Gregory remembered, and Gregory joined him. The room was empty. Bowls of daffodils bloomed on the window seats. A

fire was laid, ready for lighting. There was a tray with whisky and ice and glasses on a table. Sunlight came in the windows and slumbered on the floor and the flowers and the chintz curtains. And if Ellen was not enchanted, Gregory thought, the inertia of habit had no power. He went over to the window and looked out at the car, which was still steaming. It symbolized escape, departure. And if it was not a very good means of departure—it was doubtful if he could get it as far as Hartford—it was at any rate a sound symbol. They might not depart conveniently and comfortably, he and Ellen, but depart they would.

“What’ll you drink?” asked Jim. “Scotch or bourbon?”

“Scotch, please.” Gregory jingled change in his pocket. “Tell me about her,” he said.

Jim started to make the drinks. “Did that girl write you?” he asked.

Gregory turned around in order to lie face to face. “What girl?”

“Miss Carmody—Rose.”

“No,” he said, and waited. Jim didn’t look at him. He wanted to elaborate and then remembered that that was how liars always trapped themselves. “I want to know about Ellen,” he said. “I want to see her.”

“Why did you come just now?” Jim poured whisky over the ice and squirted soda into the glasses.

“I don’t know,” said Gregory. He raised his glass. “Here’s looking at you. I was here last fall. I almost came in then. But I was still too mixed up.” He took a drink. “Ah—that’s good. I’m all right now.”

“What do you mean—mixed up?”

“Oh—just mixed up. I had to get straight on what was important and what wasn’t.”

“And now you know?”

“I know what’s important to me, yes.”

“It’s too bad that that doesn’t include your wife’s health and happiness.”

“That’s one of the most important parts.”

Jim snorted. “What do you think she’s been going through while you sat around deciding what was important?” He sat on the arm of a leather armchair, glaring at Gregory. “You didn’t

write, you didn't call—— What do you think she thought? What do you think it did to her? By God—— And then you walk in here without a word, without a by-your-leave, and say you've come for her—— Jesus Christ!"

"I'm sorry," said Gregory. "But——"

"Sorry!"

"But I don't think it's you I owe an apology to. If my wife will forgive me, I don't give a damn what you think, if you think from now to Doomsday. I don't think where I've been and what I've been doing is any of your goddamn business. Or where I propose to go, either. With my wife. Where is she?"

"She's not here."

"You're a liar."

Jim shrugged, his eyes on Gregory's face.

"I'll just step upstairs and see," said Gregory. "Or open that door and shout." He started across to the door, grinning. "Shall I?"

Jim watched him until he reached the door and put his hand on the knob. "Stop it," he said then, wearily.

"Where is she?" said Gregory. "I want her."

Jim looked thoughtfully at his highball and took a long drink. "Sit down, John," he said. "There's no sense in fighting. I've got to talk to you." But he took another drink before he began. "What you did—leaving Ellen, not writing, all that—let's skip it. Let's not get mad. I—can see you must have had a shock too. All right. I'll try not to bear you any ill will. I want to talk to you practically. Will you do that? Will you listen to me? I'll try to be impartial."

"I'll listen to you try."

Jim looked past him out the window. He held his voice almost to a monotone. "Last summer Ellen had a nervous breakdown." He looked at Gregory.

Gregory looked back impassively. "Go on."

"She was in bed all summer. With a nurse. We've had a psychiatrist out from Hartford, Dr. Dunstan; he's connected with the Retreat there. He's a good man—the best. He was out twice a week for months. Last fall she began to get better. She's improved quite a lot. The nurse went three, four months ago. But——"

"But what?"

Jim looked at him and Gregory felt himself moved again to pity for the man. All the time the story of Ellen was lying like a stone in his breast, he was feeling sorry for Jim.

"But she's not all well yet. It would upset her very much to see you."

Gregory looked at him in silence.

"Look," Jim said. "If you go now—I'll keep in touch with you. I'll let you know how she is. I'll talk to Dr. Dunstan. *You* can talk to him. He wanted to analyze her—she didn't want it, and I wouldn't push her into anything. But maybe it would help her. You can ask him that. And if he wants it—O.K. Ask him when you can see her—and how. Whatever he says—John, I'll abide by it. She's—a lot better. If she wants to go with you later, I won't stand in her way. I swear I won't."

"Suppose she doesn't get better? What happens then? I just wait for you to keep in touch with me?"

Jim's jaw clamped shut—it was with an effort that he relaxed it enough to go on talking. "Be sensible, John. She can't stand strain or sudden excitements—she goes to pieces. She's got to be under a doctor's care still, and she likes Dunstan. And he knows all about her. Where would you take her anyway? I don't even know where you're living."

"I've been in Detroit. But——"

"She couldn't stand a trip to Detroit! She's got no friends there! What would she do? You can't uproot her like that——"

"We don't have to live in Detroit. In fact——"

"But if you're working there——"

"I quit. I'm going——"

"For God's sake! You quit! You come here without even a job and you——"

"I'll get another. I'm going back to teaching. A college town would be good for——"

"Teaching! What'll you get? Four thousand a year? My God, John—Dunstan's bill would run at least that for a year! At least! It's absurd!" He stopped himself. "Can't you see it's absurd, John?"

"You thought it was absurd for her to marry me," said Gregory. "But she did."

"And do you think that was a good thing?" asked Jim.

Gregory's hand tightened on his glass. He held himself still. Slowly his anger passed enough for him to say, "I think it was a good thing, yes. I think—we were very happy. Not always. But enough. I think I can make Ellen happy again. I think I know more about her and what she needs than your Dr. Dunstan does. I think a quiet life in a quiet town where we can make new friends—as fast as she wants to—and begin over—is going to be good for her. I don't see what's absurd about it."

Jim said, "No—maybe it isn't. In time. Maybe you're right. And if Ellen wants it, I'll be glad to see her settle down with you again, later on. But I don't think you understand, John, that right now it's out of the question. She just isn't ready."

"I think she'll be better with me than with you."

Jim's voice was heavy. "John, I don't like to tell you this, but you force me to. She's bitter against you."

Gregory put down his glass and went over to the window. He stood looking out at the car—his mobility and determination. It had stopped steaming and stood quietly waiting.

"Another drink?" Jim said.

"Thanks."

Jim mixed it and brought it over. "Here's how," said Gregory absently. He took a swallow. "I'm sorry, Jim. I'm afraid I have to see her. I think——" But he couldn't tell Jim that he thought his love could melt Ellen's bitterness, could cure her faster than science and doctors. Yes, Jim would say reasonably, later. But there would be no later, no life, for Ellen until he could get her away from here. The room suddenly felt unbearably stuffy. He ran his hand across his forehead. "I have to do the best I can for her," he said.

"I beg you not to see her."

"I have to."

"Anything——" But Gregory's face had set into a mask that could not be argued with. For a moment Jim had the surprising notion that he might be afraid of Gregory. What nonsense! "It's your responsibility," he said, and went out of the room.

There was no sound from upstairs. The blue carpet, the well-built house, the slumbering heavy air hushed all movement to sleep. Jim's knock at the door, its closing behind him, his words,

Ellen's indrawn breath—Gregory, below in the library, knew these must be vibrating somewhere in reality, but there was not enough reality to make them audible here. They died out, dwindling to nonsense syllables, to nothingness. Even Marion's sharp ears could not pick them up; she heard only her own anxiety. And if Mrs. Talcott looked out of the window and asked about the strange car standing there, she would be told that it was the butler's brother or the cook's cousin visiting, or someone who wanted a contribution to the Red Cross. And upstairs Jim was saying—what? to Ellen.

His Ellen. His dark-haired bride.

They were in the doorway. Gregory stood up. She looked sleepy. But the room was streaked and striped with horizontal late afternoon sunlight, and it did not reveal her face. He could see her. She was there. But she was dappled with light and shade and he could find nothing to report to himself but, She looks sleepy; I think she's a little thin. She had on a yellow dress and the sun glittered on the rings she wore—her wedding ring among them.

She did not move, looking toward him, frowning a little, till he came toward her. Then she straightened herself by Jim's side and Gregory stopped. "Hello, John," she said then, and came into the room and sat down in the leather armchair. "You're looking well." She rubbed her hands together as if she were cold. "May I have a drink, please, Jim? I was *fast* asleep."

"Jim," said Gregory, "would you mind if I talked to Ellen alone?"

"Yes, I would," said Jim. "What do you want, Ellen? Scotch?"

"I suppose so. Yes. Don't be silly, Jim. Why shouldn't he talk to me alone?"

"I don't want him," said Jim grimly, "to upset you."

"He doesn't look very upsetting to me. Are you upsetting, John?"

"I don't know," said Gregory.

"Well, that's honest anyway," said Ellen, and shut her eyes for a moment. Jim handed her her drink and she sipped it. "Run along, Jim." Her fingers tapped on the arm of the chair.

"John," said Jim, "I leave it in your hands." He walked—honorably, thought Gregory, his very back was honorable and

demanding of honor—to the door, went out, and shut it behind him.

“I don’t think he trusts you,” said Ellen.

“I don’t suppose he does.”

“Why don’t you sit down?”

“O.K.”

She leaned back in the chair and shut her eyes again. His gaze devoured her face. But he could not speak. The deadened air surrounded him, sealing in his emotions. How can I reach her? he thought, feeling tension rise within him. What shall I do?

“Have you seen Rose?” asked Ellen astonishingly.

“No!” said Gregory. He was infuriated. What was all this Rose business? The first thing any Talcott asked him was about her! “Why in the name of heaven should I have seen Rose?”

“Why, I don’t know. I thought she looked after things for you. But of course you haven’t been in Washington, I suppose. Or have you?”

“No, I have not.” It was so unimportant that Gregory was not even conscious of lying. “I have been in Florida and Vermont and Detroit, but I have not been in Washington.”

“I see. That must have been interesting. Traveling. Though I should think you could have picked more exciting places.”

“I was primarily interested in earning a living, not in excitement. I—— Ellen. How are you? How have you been? Jim said——”

“What did Jim say?”

“That you’d had kind of a tough time.”

She was silent, leaning back, eyes shut.

“So did I,” he said. “I had a hell of a time.”

After a little while she said, “Did you, John?”

“Yes. I thought—I thought about the past—every thing that happened—a lot. I think I gave you a bad time. I think I treated you like—I don’t know. All those last years. Do you remember saying to me that I wasn’t a whole person at all? Just a part of something that couldn’t function without a lot of other parts? Do you?”

“I suppose I do.”

“You were right. All this year—I’ve been looking for myself. I couldn’t come back until I could bring you—a whole man.

Someone who could love you and look out for you. Not such a great shakes of a man, I don't mean that. But better than before, anyway. I swear to you, better than before. I——"

But she interrupted him here. "What is it you want, John?" she said.

"Why, you. I want you. Look, let me tell you what I thought. I'm going to write to Tommy Gresham and old Blenkinhorn, and MacDougall at Yale and—oh, half a dozen of them—and see what kind of a setup they can find me. Some small place. Williams, maybe. Blenkinhorn's got connections there. You'd like Williamstown, and it's—what?—only a hundred miles or so from here. Or I don't care. Anyplace—anyplace you like. They can turn up something—lots of things. Every college is overcrowded and understaffed. And I'll teach. What do you think of that? Would you—— Don't you think you might be happy in a place like that?"

"Perhaps I might," she said, and looked down at the drink in her hand, as if surprised to see it. She drank some, sat up straighter, and pulled her feet up under her. She blinked at him and said, "You mean you want me to come with you?"

"Of course." He stared at her. Her face twisted up suddenly as if she were going to cry. "Oh, Ellen," he said, and slid off his chair and onto his knees before her. She shrank a little away from him, her face dismayed. "Oh, Ellen, I love you so. I have so much to make up to you. How did we ever get so far apart? What happened? How could I leave you? My life's nothing without you. Come with me, dear, come away, and I swear to you you'll be happy—happier than you think. They've kept you caged up here a whole year, you've forgotten what it's like to be alive. Come away with me now, my darling! Ellen, I love you so!"

"Don't, don't!" she said, shrinking back in the chair, warding him off with her hands, though he had not touched her.

He stopped. She put her hands to her face and sat huddled and tense, not crying, not looking, still as a frightened animal.

"Ellen," he said, "are you afraid of me?"

She did not move.

"You can't be afraid of me."

But she did not move.

"Don't you remember," he said slowly, "how we loved each

other? Remember how we met? Twenty-four years ago—twenty-five now, isn't it? I remember how awkward I was. I couldn't play tennis. It was in Nantucket. You were staying with the Curtisses. Do you remember how you came out before breakfast and helped me with my backhand? Remember the roses on the wire around the court, how they smelled mixed with the ocean smell, and how I whacked a ball in the wire and rose petals fell all over you? Don't you remember, sweetheart? The first time I wrote to you I was terrified. Ellen, I loved you so. I still love you like that—and every other way too. Take your hands away from your face and look at me. Look at me, Ellen."

"No," she said, "I can't, I don't want to."

"You must. You can't hide like this."

"John, you must let me alone! I can't—I can't hold on——"

"Don't hold on, then. Let go."

"No, no!" She threw up her head and stared at him.

"Yes, dear," he said, and reached out and took her hands. She went very still in the chair. He gripped those cold hands firmly, as if to send through them into her body love, strength, delight—all the things one needs for living. "Trust me, Ellen," he said. "Let go. It doesn't matter. You're breaking yourself this way. Don't bear so much. Let go. For your own sake. You've always been too brave. When the baby didn't live, when your father died, when Tim went—you've always asked too much from yourself, Ellen. You must——"

"You devil!" said Ellen, and, wrenching her hands from him, she clawed him from eye to chin. Then, rocking back and forth in the chair, she laughed and cried together.

Gregory stared at her. His face was smarting. But it was only a second before he leaned forward and took her in his arms, kneeling beside her, holding her awkwardly, smoothing her hair, trying to quiet her beating hands. "Ellen, Ellen," he said, "darling, there, there, cry, cry all you want, it's all right." She was laughing now more than she was crying, and she relaxed except for the laughter, leaning against his shoulder. "Be quiet, be quiet," he said, and thought, She is quieter, she'll be better.

"Why do you want me?" said Ellen rapidly. "Is it my money? If it's money I'll give it to you and you can go. Go away. Mother thought you were dead. I said, 'No. No, he's not dead. It's not

John who's dead. John's too smart.' 'He'll be back, then,' she said. 'Wait and see.' And——"

"Ellen! Ellen, stop it!"

"And I do see. Here you are. What do you want? How much? I'll give you money, but that's all; don't ask me any questions, it won't do you any good because I won't tell you anything. Go away."

"Darling, listen—listen and be quiet! This is John——"

"John the Baptist!" cried Ellen, and gave a great laugh. "I'll cut off your head," she said. "Just like that!" And she put her hands on his throat as if to mark just where she would cut it through, and her fingers—amazingly strong—dug into the flesh and he felt himself choking, unable to breathe. "You'll never find him now," he heard her say. "Why didn't I think before? But it isn't too late. You'll never find him, he's safe now, safe!" Then Gregory's hands, believing long before his brain that she would really kill him if she could, came up and struggled with hers. Her nails tore, her rings tore, she panted, and her face was convulsed. He had to pull her fingers loose one by one. As she let go, she sobbed once, and then cried, "Timmy! Timmy!"

When the door was flung open, banging the table behind it, and Jim came in, Ellen was sobbing despairingly and Gregory was holding her in his arms, smoothing her hair and staring bleakly over her head. He looked up at Jim and said, "I'm sorry. Does she have any sedative? Maybe you ought to call the doctor."

Ellen threw her head back and hooted with laughter. "That's right," she said, "I'm very sic'. Oh, Jim. There you are." She pushed Gregory away and stumbled toward her brother.

"We'll call him," said Jim. "Come on upstairs and lie down. I'll give you a nice blue pill."

"I don't want a pill. Not till he goes away."

"He's going right off."

"I want to see him go."

"You come upstairs. I'll see he goes. I promise you."

"No."

"I promise, darling."

"I don't believe you. I can't trust anyone. Don't you see that? How can I rest—— How can I rest——"

"Ellen," said Gregory, "I give you my word that I will go away."

It may take me a while to get the car started, though, because I don't know whether the radiator's cracked and I have to see. If you'll go upstairs and lie down, I'll honk the horn three times when I go and you can look out and see."

She looked back and forth between the two men and then said, "You're all against me. All right. But I won't take a pill. I won't let you get anything out of me that way. And you needn't think you will."

"Darling," Jim began, "nobody wants——"

"Oh yes, he does," said Ellen. "But I didn't tell him. Not a word." And she laughed and started for the door. In the doorway she stopped and looked back. "Oh, Jim, if he needs any money, give him what he wants," and she went out.

"Excuse me," said Jim, and went after her.

The Hartford railroad station, thought Gregory, is getting to be a habit. This late Sunday afternoon it was fairly empty and the newsstand was closed. He sat down on a bench and took out a pack of cigarettes which the Talcotts' chauffeur, who'd driven him to Hartford, had given him. The iodine on his face and throat still smarted. He looked at the ticket window and thought that it shouldn't be tough to decide which direction he was going in. There were only two to choose from, up or down. But he felt too tired to make even that choice. Or he could stay in Hartford, get a room at one of the hotels, call up Dr. Dunstan—that would be the sensible thing to do. And for the rest of my life, he thought, I had better do the sensible thing. Of course it's assuming a great deal to think that I shall know the sensible thing when I see it. And perhaps I'm assuming as much in believing that there will be more to my life.

But no. There would be. He was a little lightheaded with strain and fatigue; this seemed to widen his vision. He saw a great deal of life stretching before him, a twisting, reduplicating path to be taken. In which, it was obvious, other people's "sensible things" would not be sensible for him. He would have to figure out his own sense.

If he went up the line, he would come back to Vermont in the

spring, just as he had a year ago, coming out of great danger into peace. But that was all hollow now. Why should he need peace? Not any more. Why should he be trying to save himself, to find himself, to struggle bloodily for his identity in the midst of this rushing world? If there is anyone who is expendable, he thought, it is I. My only use, and so my only safety, will be to throw myself away. There was a kind of peace in the thought. Having lost everything, he had nothing to fear. Very few people could say that about themselves—could be quite heedless of circumstances. I can, thought Gregory. The cigarette was making him a little dizzy. If someone needs help I can help them, he thought, and if someone needs murdering I can murder them. I have no hostages to fortune any more. They have all been taken.

The last time he had been here, he had gone in the other direction, down the line to Washington and Rose. Now that was lost too. And he saw that he had been wrong, a moment before, in thinking that he could help anyone; he should have said, Anyone but Rose. Coming to Ellen, he had forgotten the end of Rose's letter. It had been in his mind only that he had forsaken her, not that she had forsaken him too. She was quite right to do it, of course. For even if he had gone to her, free—free as the air—he would have been a cripple. Rose needed love. He couldn't give her any. Rose needed closeness and attachment. He was as detached as a Buddhist monk.

She had asked him, he remembered, to "hope that she will be very happy." He had not done so before. Now he repeated the words under his breath. She did not sound too sure that she would. But he could not do anything about it but repeat the formula she had given him, though he did not think his incantation would help her much. What obscure flaw? What strain? What lack of conductivity had kept him from loving her? If he were really to be sensible, in sensible people's way, it was the sensible thing to do.

Was it the old, long, fatal habit of Ellen which had kept him from Rose? But even his love for Ellen had had this same flaw, and in the end he had not loved Ellen enough—not enough to know how to save her. Had he ever loved anyone enough?

He had kept apologizing idiotically to Jim for all the trouble of having him driven to Hartford (the Ford he'd rented was

beyond hope; it had died on this final fateful mission of bringing him to the Talcotts'), for the drinks, and the sandwiches Jim had tried to make him eat; until Jim had caught the infection and apologized insanely for not asking him to stay for dinner. And all the time Marion was sitting with Ellen and holding her hand while she cried and told Marion how she hated her, and the Telephone Service was hunting Dr. Dunstan from golf course to clubhouse to cocktail party. Gregory left as soon as he knew the doctor had been reached and was on the way. Jim had been torn, feeling it his duty to keep Gregory until the doctor could talk to him, but passionately anxious to be rid of his presence. "Let me know where to reach you," Jim said. "I'll write you about her." All anger between the two men had been forgotten in their common shipwreck.

"Thank you," said Gregory, "I will."

She is lost forever and I am responsible. There's no use in going to see the doctor and having him hack at the edge of the wound, trying to soften the blow.

I suppose it's because I'm numb that I can think about it this way. When the numbness wears off, I shall wince at her name. She is mad and I sent her mad.

This is the other person I cannot help. I could help Jim more easily, or his wife, or the mother. All I do is make Ellen worse. She was never so bad as today. She struck Marion once. She wanted to kill me. Jim says it was Tim she was talking about. She thinks he's alive and I want to kill him. In order to think he's alive, she has to project my murder of him into the future.

I said I could be a murderer, didn't I? To Ellen I am. And she is right. Only it is Ellen herself I have killed instead of Timmy. Or does she really know that, and is Timmy only a pretext? Probably. She sees him as her justification, her claim to reality, the shadow she casts on time. To think him dead, irrevocably dead, is more than she can bear; it means she is lost.

It's the same problem I face, of course, he thought reasonably, lighting another cigarette. Ellen irrevocably lost through my stupidity and callousness—can I face that? The hardest thing we have to learn is to accept finality. To know that there is nothing I can do to reclaim her, to make up for what I did, that action is irreversible and final, final, final! I will never have another chance

to help Ellen. All my pain is only waste. Remorse is worth absolutely nothing. And since I feel—shall feel, rather—remorse, the I that feels it is at cross-purposes with the world; and if that is so, how can I trust it? And if I can't trust it, what use is it, this I, to me?

No use.

Yet detached, free, I know in my numbness that I am on the side of the living. I shall go on, go on somewhere, see new places, enjoy new people, and someday perhaps find a sensible thing to do. What will it be? I don't know. But it will mean the committal of the last hostage I can give to fortune—myself—into fortune's hands. I have so much to make up for. Ellen—Rose—Timmy. And the old man with the black Indian eyes in the autumn sunlight. But I must give myself away knowing that nothing I do can help these people, living or dead, to whom I owe so much. There is no great celestial ledger where I can balance my debt with action, and I can never know whether my action is really sensible and good or as foolish as it has always been in the past.

There's something wrong with living. Is it just that we go about it wrong, here in America today? Or is there some more basic human maladjustment, something not merely a product of our miraculously inept and irrelevant culture? For we are creatures of minutiae, living by bits and pieces and scraps and fragments, and always trapped at the end by the opposite thing, by ideals and abstractions. From the abstraction of not-being we come to the abstraction of ceasing-to-be, rolled on the familiar incomprehensible abstraction of time, with which we live in such frightening intimacy that when we cease to ignore and begin to question it, we are appalled, we drop through the gap between our precious fragments of life and love into the abyss of nothingness. How can it be that one day piled on another day can add up to a life? How can accretion make a living organism?

Ellen and I made Timmy, and Timmy died. And I hurt Ellen little by little over a long time until, with Timmy dead, I hurt her once too often. Any time before that I might have stopped and saved her. And why didn't I? What kept me blind? What blinds me now? Oh, how can a man ever equal his responsibilities and know in time, in time, what he must do? Perhaps there is something I should do now. Perhaps if I went back—— No. He saw

her face again. It is over, it is over, it is over. I have got to remember it! It is too late! For little by little as I hurt her, finality accrued and Ellen's life spun round like a ship going over and submerged her and she can't be saved any longer! Step by step we walk through life and suddenly it is another thing altogether, a completed thing, quite different from the sum of its parts.

The life I had is completed and I am left alone. There is no place in it for me any more. Tim is dead and so is Roosevelt and my dedication to him, and the old man, my grandfather. Ellen is lapped in madness as if in ice—or crystal, protecting her and distorting the world. No one can touch her. And Rose, whom I should have loved and who only charmed me as warmth and vitality have always charmed me; Rose whom, God help me, I crippled a little too—Rose has chosen to do the best she can and live without me, in spite of me. Love could have trapped me in that world, and I was too afraid of the trap to love enough. Even Rose who asked so little and offered so much. Even my son. Even the leader whom I served. Even the old man who gave me the lost gift I never found of the past, of his life. Even Ellen, my heart's delight, my intimate enemy, my victim and torturer, Ellen . . .

I slipped through that world and away from them, to save myself, and know now I have saved nothing. What shall I love now in this empty world to which I am born this evening in the Hartford railroad station? What shall I do with the nothing I have saved? To lose everything, to have nothing to fear, complete freedom of choice and no compulsions, is hardly to exist at all. To live is to go forward, into the trap, into obligations and necessities, out of numb courage into fear, regret, and pain.

He stood up restlessly and walked to the door of the waiting room. Some warning tremor told him that numbness was going to end and the remorse he had spoken of so glibly as useless was going to shake him and bend him. I must decide quickly where I am going, he thought; but numbness is chary of decision. He stood in the door, looking out at the street—it was dusk now—and thought of this fragrant spring dusk muffling the land, choking and cherishing, hurting and healing; and of the bright sun that would rise tomorrow (to find him where?), spilling over the curve of the continent, and drawing from it crops, and the men

to raise the crops, and the women to bear the men who would raise them in thirty years' time; flooding the harsh lines of factories and glinting off the singing machines within them; revealing the brutality of the cities and the brutality of empty fields, the secretiveness of woods and slums; and glittering at last in white light on the bare peaks of the mountains. And in all this place, he and his bare hands stood alone, waiting for an answer, waiting for a direction, for the blasting and blinding miracle which could teach him how to love.

